

# STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN SIERRA LEONE ASSESSMENT 2025 REPORT



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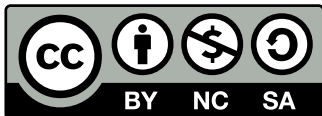
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# Foreword

It is with profound pride and a deep sense of responsibility that I present the *State of Democracy in Sierra Leone Assessment 2025 Report*. This landmark publication captures our nation's continuing journey to strengthen democratic governance, uphold the rule of law and broaden civic participation.

Produced under the auspices of the National Commission for Democracy (NCD) and made possible through the support of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) with funding from the European Union, together with the technical expertise of the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), this report stands as a testament to the power of collaboration—uniting national institutions, international partners and the citizens of Sierra Leone.

It offers a clear-eyed, evidence-based appraisal of our democratic landscape—celebrating hard-won progress, confronting persistent challenges and advancing practical, actionable recommendations for reform. Grounded in inclusive engagement, it reflects the diverse voices and lived experiences of our people, from grassroots communities to national leadership.

As Chairperson of the NCD, I urge policymakers, civil society, the media, development partners and citizens alike to treat this report not only as a mirror to see where we stand, but also as a map to guide where we must go. Strengthening democracy is the shared duty of all Sierra Leoneans, and only through collective action, open dialogue and mutual trust can we secure a more just, inclusive and accountable future for generations to come.

Marian Angela Samu  
*Chairperson, National Commission for Democracy*  
*Freetown, Sierra Leone, September 2025*

# Acknowledgements

The National Commission for Democracy (NCD) extends its deepest appreciation to all partners, stakeholders and citizens whose invaluable contributions made the *State of Democracy in Sierra Leone Assessment 2025 Report* a reality.

This national assessment was conducted under the auspices of the NCD, with the generous support of the European Union through International IDEA, whose steadfast commitment to strengthening democratic governance in Sierra Leone remains exemplary.

We express our profound gratitude to the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR) for serving as the technical lead. The IGR's adherence to methodological rigour, evidence-driven analysis and inclusive stakeholder engagement has ensured that this report responds effectively to national priorities while meeting the highest international standards.

Special recognition is due to the Steering Committee, comprising representatives from government institutions, civil society, academia and the media, among others. We especially acknowledge the invaluable contributions of:

- University of Sierra Leone (USL)
- Parliament of Sierra Leone (PoSL)
- Ministry of Public Administration and Political Affairs (MoPAPA)
- Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL)
- Youth Alliance for Democracy and Accountability—Sierra Leone (YADA-SL)
- Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ)
- Campaign for Good Governance (CGG)
- National Council for Civic Education and Development (NaCCED)
- Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL)
- Women's Forum (WF)
- Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL)
- Office of National Security (ONS)
- Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC)
- Centre for Electoral and Civic Education (CECE)

Their oversight, critical review and strategic guidance were instrumental in shaping a balanced, credible and representative assessment.

Finally, we extend heartfelt thanks to the many citizens from every district who participated in consultations, surveys and focus group discussions. Their voices

and lived experiences form the very foundation of this report—a reminder that democracy is strongest when it truly reflects the will, wisdom and aspirations of the people.

# Abbreviations

<b>ACC</b>	Anti-Corruption Commission of Sierra Leone
<b>APC</b>	All People's Congress
<b>CERD</b>	International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965)
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organization
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>ECSL</b>	Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone
<b>EII</b>	Expert informant interview
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>GSM</b>	Gender and Sexual Minority
<b>ICCPR</b>	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
<b>IGR</b>	Institute for Governance Reform
<b>MP</b>	Member of parliament
<b>NCD</b>	National Commission for Democracy
<b>NEW</b>	National Elections Watch
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>PMDC</b>	People's Movement for Democratic Change
<b>RUF</b>	Revolutionary United Front
<b>SLAJ</b>	Sierra Leone Association of Journalists
<b>SLPP</b>	Sierra Leone People's Party
<b>SoD</b>	State of Democracy
<b>UDHR</b>	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background to the State of Democracy report

Sierra Leone's war to peace transition—including democratic reform—has often been cited as an excellent case study of peacebuilding and democratic consolidation after violent conflict, albeit over two decades since the end of its civil war in 2002 the country is still grappling with a dual challenge of meaningful democratic institutionalization and inclusive peacebuilding. Progress made in the conduct of five post-war elections, which produced two successful transfers of power between the two leading political parties (in 2007 and 2018), has been greatly diminished by a confluence of factors. Among these are ethno-regional bifurcation; declining public trust in elections; shortfalls in justice and the rule of law; lack of inclusive citizenship; weakness in the economy—and corresponding weakness in the media sector ('media poverty'). This nonlinear experience is a testament that progress towards democratic consolidation, freedom, fairness and stability is increasingly under threat if not regularly evaluated and guarded by both state institutions and citizens.

## Why the report?

This State of Democracy (SoD) report is part of larger efforts by the National Commission for Democracy (NCD), with support from International IDEA's EU-funded 'Sierra Leone Democracy Strengthening Programme', to benchmark Sierra Leone's democracy-building aspirations and progress. It is a stocktake of the national environment and its respect for freedom; human rights and civil liberties; periodic, free, fair and trusted elections; accountability on the part of power holders; and the rule of law. The SoD contains a body of evidence that reflects the social and political realities and lived experiences of Sierra Leoneans, with the aim of supporting informed public debate and interventions regarding the quality of democracy in the country.

### The assessment's methodology

The assessment is inspired by International IDEA's Assessing the Quality of Democracy: A Practical Guide (Beetham et al. 2008), adopted by the Steering Committee. The committee opted to focus on 10 of the framework's democracy themes, which fall under three main pillars as follows:

#### 1. Citizenship, law and rights:

- Nationhood and citizenship
- The rule of law and access to justice
- Civil and political rights
- Economic and social rights

#### 2. Representation and accountable government:

- Free and fair elections
- The democratic role of political parties
- The democratic effectiveness of Parliament
- Civilian control of the military and police

#### 3. Civil society and popular participation:

- Political participation
- The media in a democratic society

Specific questions were answered in every theme. Responses to questions on the 10 SoD themes were collected from three data sources: (a) primary data collected in April and May 2025 through 30 focus groups discussions (FGDs) across the country; involving youth, women, men and other vulnerable groups such as persons with disability; (b) interviews with dozens of expert informants; and (c) secondary data and insights from literature. The report therefore narrates what the people say democracy looks and feels like; with their testimonies, stories and anecdotes collected through the FGDs. Expert informants helped to provide depth and nuance to what was said in FGDs, while secondary data obtained through literature review was used to support the people's stories with data and sometimes to provide comparative insights.

### Key findings

1. *Nationhood and citizenship.* The inclusivity of the political nation is put into question by the race-based provisions of part two of the Citizenship Act of 1973 which limits citizenship at birth to 'negroid Africans' only. While there are laws and regulations that

protect against discrimination on the basis of cultural, religious and other differences, and provide for international obligations regarding protections for refugees and asylum seekers, the current citizenship provisions are non-inclusive; being racially biased, they are inconsistent with global human rights and citizenship standards.

2. *Political participation.* In principle, the law provides protection and freedom to citizens to self-organize and to form and/or belong to voluntary associations. In practice, however, the state has become increasingly interested in co-opting or coercing the activities of formal professional and social grouping to act in its interests. Those who cannot be co-opted or coerced increasingly find the space for their operations being constrained.
3. *The media in a democratic society.* Whilst there is no overt and systemic coercion and control of the media by the state or private interests, the vast majority of media operations in Sierra Leone are politically owned or aligned. The dynamics of government and opposition support colour perceptions of financial sustainability among journalists and media houses; political patronage and corruption within the media extends to politically-exposed individuals and groups registering media houses that serve their own agendas. Public access to media is growing across digital platforms—mostly through radio, particularly outside the capital city.
4. *Political parties and democracy.* There is broad consensus that political parties operate freely but have weak internal democracy, with the leaders and a few powerful figures shaping their direction. Although there were 17 registered political parties at the time of the assessment, Sierra Leone's is a de facto two-party system. The dominant parties—the All People's Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP)—have large and steady membership bases, mostly recruited on ethnic affinities rather than policy or ideology. This matters because ethnic politicization limits issue-based political debate, with political parties relying instead on regional and ethnic loyalties to win a majority of votes. The nature of political parties, especially their ethnic-based patron-client relationships, shapes winner-takes-all governance practices. This makes elections and access to power existential and highly contested.
5. *Free and fair elections.* Sierra Leone has held routine five-yearly, multiparty general elections, with consistently high voter turnout and two changeovers in ruling party. Voter registration and voting procedures are designed and implemented for inclusivity and accessibility, although challenges can be faced by some citizens on account of literacy and other accessibility

challenges. Election results have always stood, but in the face of irregularity complaints and misgivings by the losing party. Election observation mission (EOM) reports in the multiparty era have catalogued a list of electoral limitations concerning the planning and delivery of elections. In particular, the public has perceived the two election management bodies—the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) and the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC)—as lacking independence and capacity. Since 2007, the country has witnessed an increase in low-intensity election-related violence and divisive campaign rhetoric.

6. *Parliamentary effectiveness.* The effectiveness of Parliament in Sierra Leone to support the quality of democracy is inhibited by its inability to offer effective oversight of the executive, leading to it becoming more a 'rubber stamp' than a tool for scrutiny and accountability. This is problematic because MPs are not only the embodiment of the collective voices of the citizens, but are also bestowed with the constitutional mandate of law making, oversight and representation. Citizens generally have very low access to their elected MPs. Regular consultations at a constituency level are neither mandated in law nor undertaken in practice.
7. *Civil and political liberties.* All the freedoms specified in the Constitution of Sierra Leone (1991) are consistent with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). While civil liberties are respected and protected by law—including freedom to organize and form voluntary associations, move around without restrictions, and receive and disseminate information—in recent years many restrictive regulations have been introduced that can be used to limit freedoms and civil liberties. The persistent refusal of the police to allow people to protest or demonstrate is seen by democracy watchers as a significant curtailment on freedom of expression and assembly, and a limit on constitutional rights.
8. *Economic and social rights.* Sierra Leone's democracy has not translated into significantly better welfare for its citizens. Although the Constitution commits the State to harness the country's natural resources to maximize the health, education, social welfare and cultural development of the citizens, Sierra Leone has lingered in the lowest ranks of the UN Human Development Index for decades. Access to basic services is uneven in terms of geography, social status and gender. Despite the introduction of new laws designed to strengthen women's economic and social rights, their implementation is obstructed by prevailing patriarchal attitudes.
9. *The rule of law and justice.* Generally, confidence in the courts and penal system to deliver fair and effective justice is low. As

revealed in social surveys, people feel that there is often unequal treatment of persons on account of social standing, influence, political persuasion and money. The judiciary's ability to maintain de facto independence from the executive remains in question, as is the case for many institutions in Sierra Leone. The majority of Sierra Leoneans have little or no confidence that they will get justice through the formal courts. Instead, they rely heavily on customary justice, which is viewed as more effective even though it is not always aligned with human rights. The general perception among people is that not all public officials are equally subject to the rule of law and to transparent rules in the performance of their functions.

*10. Civilian control of the armed forces and the police.* Following extensive security sector reforms after the end of civil conflict in 2002, the civilian administration has significant control of the armed forces and the police. These reforms also aimed to depoliticize the security agencies and dismantle ethnic biases, but progress has been uneven. Despite the creation of independent bodies through which citizens can raise complaints about the actions of the police, there is limited accountability for any violent police actions undertaken and police bribery remains a notable feature of most public interactions with the force (e.g. during routine checks and at night-time checkpoints).

### Looking ahead

Rather than the traditional assessment recommendations, this SoD report presents fundamental questions, framed according to intervention opportunities across thematic issues of the SoD. These questions are addressed to key institutions as follows:

- How can the media, civil society organizations (CSOs) and rights-based organizations work together to ensure that racial exclusion from citizenship in Sierra Leone is eliminated?
- How can civil society and agencies promoting democracy strengthen citizens' political participation across all categories of people?
- How can the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and other umbrella media organizations gain greater credibility and reach across the country to support all the pillars of democracy in Sierra Leone?
- How can community radio outlets (the main source of information outside Freetown) be supported to deal with poverty within the

media workforce and to prioritize public service broadcasting over co-option by wealthy elites and the private sector? How can social media be harnessed to support a more citizen-driven information ecosystem?

- How can the Political Parties Regulation Commission and CSOs induce political parties to uphold standards of internal democracy that (a) safeguard the will and interests of ordinary members against domination by powerful individuals and groups; and (b)? And take measures to continually strengthen inclusive political participation?
- What can electoral management bodies (EMBs) do to improve the credibility of elections and ultimately reduce contestation of elections results?
- How can Parliament and CSOs co-create an agenda for greater accountability of parliamentarians to citizens, and protect Parliament from the control of the executive?
- What explains the shrinking of civic space and how can CSOs and rights-based organizations advocate greater civil society space free from political co-option?
- What explains the unfair application of the law and how can civil and human right groups work together to strengthen accountability and the rule of law in Sierra Leone? What can be done to create more responsive and accountable police and judicial institutions that citizens trust?
- How can the judiciary, Political Parties Regulation Commission and CSOs together address politically-related violence and hold perpetrators accountable?
- What can be done to (a) support and strengthen the rights of women, young people and other marginalized groups; and (b) to apply existing legal provisions to enhance their rights in practice?
- How can democracy as a system of government be strengthened and reimagined in Sierra Leone such that its dividends contribute to meaningful public service delivery and ending poverty?



## Chapter 1

# BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

In June 2023 Sierra Leone held its fifth multiparty elections since 1991, making the post-war period the country's longest spell of democracy since independence. Routine elections and political leaders' adherence to term limits mean Sierra Leone stands out in West Africa, a region that has been showing signs of reversal to military dictatorships. However, Sierra Leone's democracy-building project is showing mixed results. Data from International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices, for instance, show that while Sierra Leone performs in the mid-range on measures of rights, rule of law and representation, and in the high range in participation, the country has experienced significant declines in credible elections and elected government (International IDEA n.d.).

Since 2018, Sierra Leone has witnessed heightened political-related anxieties and frustrations characterized by harmful political polarization, increasingly vitriolic political discussions and hate speech on social media—and even occasional violent protests that have led to loss of life. Its bifurcated party system has led to a polarized public and antagonistic voting patterns where party activists and sympathizers have developed a sense of entitlement and a zero-sum approach to winning power for ethno-regional benefits (Bangura 2025). Lingerings tensions over the 2023 elections, which were criticized by many local and international observers,<sup>1</sup> have furthered a decline in citizen satisfaction with democracy in Sierra Leone.<sup>2</sup>

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1 The EU's Election Observation Report said Sierra Leone's June 2023 general elections suffered from a lack of transparency, political violence and statistical inconsistencies (EU EOM 2023).

2 Afrobarometer's 2021 annual review found support for democracy in the country remained high, but satisfaction with the way democracy works had dropped (see: Afrobarometer 2022).

It is against this background that this State of Democracy (SoD) study aims to provide a clear picture of Sierra Leone's primary strengths and weaknesses against core democratic benchmarks: including, but not limited to, participation; representation; existence of free political parties; credible elections; and the rule of law. Whilst drawing on existing literature and reports, the SoD also offers an important chance for a cross-section of the population to speak freely and openly about their experiences of democracy in Sierra Leone. Being locally led, with discussions framed and guided in ways that make people feel safe in voicing their views, the SoD's findings provide an important evidence base that can support informed dialogue on the future of the country's democratic trajectory.

## Chapter 2

# SIERRA LEONE'S PURSUIT OF DEMOCRACY: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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### 2.1. A PROMISING START

Sierra Leone gained independence on 27 April 1961. Initially, its commitment to political competition between individuals and parties for political office was a strong characteristic (Cartwright 1970). In the early years of independence political participation, the rule of law, civil and political liberties, free political parties and the media operated without state-imposed restraints (Wyse 1989).

---

### 2.2. THE BEGINNINGS OF POST-INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLES

However, following the death of the country's first leader Sir Milton Margai in 1964, challenges began to emerge. A succession struggle within the ruling party saw Sir Albert Margai succeed his brother—but only after a contest in which he was accused of ethnic manipulation and mobilization. In the aftermath of the power struggle, scores of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) leadership from the north of the country left the party and joined the newly created All People's Congress (APC), headed by former Mayor of Freetown, Siaka Stevens. In the general elections that followed in 1967, the ruling SLPP lost to the APC but elements in the army staged a coup to prevent the APC from taking office. A succession of coups followed, along with executions and purges in the military, which ended with Stevens reclaiming the position of prime minister and eventually President, with the passage of a new constitution in 1971.

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## 2.3. THE PERIOD OF ONE-PARTY RULE

According to Sierra Leone's post-war Truth and Reconciliation Report, years of one-party dictatorship and abuse of human rights in the 1970s and 1980s was a contributing factor to the decade-long civil conflict from 1991 (TRC 2004). Siaka Stevens was at the helm for much of that period, and it was he that formally transitioned Sierra Leone to a one-party state following a deeply problematic referendum in 1978. Under the one-party state, the option for citizens to associate or organize under a political grouping of their choice as a fundamental expression of political freedom remained closed (TRC 2004). The one-party state utilized blackmail, co-option, coercion and harassment directed at the judiciary, civil society, journalists and academia to enforce their compliance (Sesay 1999). Accompanying these restraints and constraints on political life was severe economic hardship, particularly throughout the 1980s, which contributed to fomenting rebellion (Richards 1996; Kandeh 1999).

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## 2.4. THE CIVIL WAR AND ITS TOLL

In March 1991, war broke out in the country led by a group that announced itself as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The RUF, which had roots in the radical-left student activism that began in college campuses in the mid-1970s, and which was backed by allies in neighbouring Liberia, claimed it was fighting to end one-party dictatorship and its consequences including state failure, corruption and economic and social marginalization. In response, President Joseph Momoh (1985–1992) ushered in a new constitution that brought the one-party state to an end and laid the grounds for a return to multiparty democracy. But before that change could happen the military intervened, and following a coup d'état in April 1992 it established the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). During the 11-year conflict, which gained global notoriety for some of the worse human rights violations seen in conflicts worldwide (Hayner 2000), a military presence in government remained a near constant feature. In 1996, NPRC Chairman Valentine Strasser was ousted in a palace coup led by current President Julius Maada Bio. But efforts to reinstate a democratic figurehead were again short-lived, with the military intervening again in 1997. They would eventually hand back power to Ahmad Tejan Kabba, first elected in 1996, who would go on to become Sierra Leone's first post-war president.

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## 2.5. THE END OF THE WAR AND RETURN TO MULTIPARTY POLITICS

In 2002 the war in Sierra Leone finally came to an end following the signing of the Lome Peace Agreement in 1999 and subsequent negotiations, with regional and international actors bringing economic pressures and direct military involvement to bear. Nine political parties contested the multiparty elections that were held that year, won by Tejan-Kabbah. Sierra Leone held four routine multiparty elections since: in 2007, 2012, 2018 and 2023, with consistently high voter turnout. Election results have always stood, although always in the face of complaints by the losing party which, with the exception of 2023, were raised through court challenges<sup>3</sup>. The vote-share has been dominated by the SLPP and APC, with power changing hands between them twice—in 2007 and 2018—in both cases when the sitting president had served two terms and was thus not eligible to contest. Whilst these changeovers of power are an important marker of progress, electoral democracy in Sierra Leone is increasingly challenged by the intensification of ethno-regional political divisions and a winner-takes-all approach to governance.

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3 In 2023 the APC, mistrustful of the judiciary to provide a fair hearing, chose to boycott legislative institutions at both the national and district levels.

## Chapter 3

# OBJECTIVE OF THE REPORT

This report benchmarks Sierra Leone's democracy-building and contains a body of evidence that reflects the local realities and experiences of Sierra Leoneans. It aims to provide the evidence that supports informed public debate and interventions on the quality of democracy in the country. The assessment is inspired by a modified version of International IDEA's [State of Democracy Assessment Framework](#), consisting of three 'pillars' and a number of associated themes (Table 3.1):

**Table 3.1. State of Democracy pillars and themes**

Pillar	The themes that are probed
Citizenship, law and rights	Nationhood and citizenship
	The rule of law and access to justice
	Civil and political rights
	Economic and social rights
Representation and accountable government	Free and fair elections
	The democratic role of political parties
	Effective and responsive government
	The democratic effectiveness of Parliament
	Civilian control of the military and police
	Integrity in public life
Civil society and popular participation	Political participation
	The media in a democratic society

## Chapter 4

# METHODOLOGY

This 2025 SoD is derived from the following main data sources.

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### 4.1. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS)

The FGDs were designed to obtain information from the people about the state of democracy in the country as they experience it, and to provide anecdotes and nuances that deepen insights in ways not possible through surveys. FGDs were held in all the 5 regions and 16 districts of the country. In each district, two FGDs were held to bring together women, men and youth as separate groups.<sup>4</sup> The FGDs recruited people in both urban and rural communities. Table 4.1. shows the FGD distribution by region and district.

In total, 240 participants were engaged in 30 FGDs conducted across 16 districts in Sierra Leone: 10 for women, 10 for youth (male and female) and 10 for elders (male and female). FGDs were evenly split between urban and rural areas and (in total) between male and female participants.

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### 4.2. EXPERT INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (EIIS)

The SoD assessment defined expert informants as persons representing institutions within government, civil society organizations (CSOs) and the media, deemed to hold competence drawn from their professional standing and experience to comment

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<sup>4</sup> In Sierra Leone the National Youth Policy (2020) and the National Youth Commission Act (2009) define youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 35.

Table 4.1. The FGD distribution by region and district

Region	District	FGD Locations	
		Urban	Rural
Eastern	Kailahun	Women	Elders
	Kenema	Youth	Women
	Kono	Youth	Women
North-Eastern	Bombali	Youth	Elders
	Falaba	Elders	Women
	Koinadugu	Elders	Youth
	Tonkolili	Women	Elders
North-Western	Kambia	Elders	Women
	Port-Loko	Women	Youth
	Karene	Women	Elders
Southern	Bo	Youth	Women
	Bonthe	Elders	Youth
	Moyamba	Women	Elders
	Pujehun	Elders	Youth
Western	Rural	Elders	Youth
	Urban	Youth	Women

on the quality of democracy and good governance in Sierra Leone. 15 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with such experts on specific aspects of the SoD framework. The EIs include community leaders, democracy observers, representatives and other professionals with first-hand knowledge and insights—and ability to provide recommendations for democracy improvement. Most of the EIs, save for traditional authorities and some CSOs, took place in the capital city where institutions are mostly located. See Annex A for a full list of the institutions engaged in the process.



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### 4.3. SECONDARY DATA

The study also consulted a number of nationally representative surveys and international benchmarks on democratic governance including Afrobarometer, Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL), Freedom House and the Ibrahim Index of African Governance.

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### 4.4. VALIDATION

Consultations and coordination were maintained with the National Commission for Democracy (NCD), International IDEA, Stats SL and CSOs working on governance. This was for purposes of quality control, to ensure the relevance of the study for the Sierra Leonean context and to build government and public support for policy and programme recommendations. The consultations and coordination included the following:

- Meetings on the design of the instrument;
- Training sessions and media launch workshops at the beginning of the study—where media and CSO representatives identified their priority issues to be addressed;
- Continuous discussions throughout the preparation of the study with both the NCD and International IDEA;
- Review and validation of the draft report by the Steering Committee on 21 August 2025; and
- A validation event with stakeholders on 26 August 2025 in Freetown, with feedback and perspectives from participants used to shape the final report.

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### 4.5. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The findings of the report are structured around 10 themes from the SoD framework, namely: nationhood and citizenship, political participation, the media in a democratic society, political parties and democracy, free and fair elections, parliamentary effectiveness, civil and political liberties, rule of law and justice, economic and social rights, and civilian control of the armed forces and the police. For

ease of reference regarding how well the country performed on each theme, the main conclusions and summaries are colour-coded as follows: **Red** indicates bad practice, **Blue** indicates a mix of good and practice, and **Green** indicates good or satisfactory practice.

## Chapter 5

# FINDINGS

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### 5.1. NATIONHOOD AND CITIZENSHIP

#### Overview

Inclusivity of the political nation—including consensus on citizenship, nationality and the national boundaries—provides the basis on which all the people demand and exercise common expectations of liberty, security, the rule of law, political participation and all the other tenets of democracy.

There is consensus on the boundaries of the country but citizenship at birth is reserved only for those of African descent. It is on account of this law that people of Lebanese descent who are born in the country and have lived here for generations are not granted Sierra Leonean nationality. In law and practice, cultural differences are acknowledged and protected, and the country respects international obligations regarding protections for refugees and asylum seekers.

#### *How inclusive is the political nation and state citizenship?*

- The political nation is not inclusive of all those who live within the territory, on account of the fact that citizenship at birth is limited to persons of 'negroid-African' descent.

Expert informants stated that the biggest controversy is this continued failure to fully address citizenship rights, consistent with international human rights obligations. Although Sierra Leone is a signatory to the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the country's citizenship law maintains racial qualifications. The Citizenship Act of 1973 is the law governing citizenship in Sierra Leone, with amendments made to it in 2006 and 2017. It grants automatic and full citizenship only

to people born of parents of 'negroid-African' descent. This race qualification affects the significant Lebanese and Indian diaspora in Sierra Leone.

In the view of a prominent journalist, 'our country's citizenship law is not only anachronistic, it is shameful. Despite the country talking non-discrimination of people because of gender or race, the law does just that' (Fofana 2016). Whilst an expert informant of Lebanese origin argued that while the law does not affect their economic and social life, it deprives the Lebanese of political representation: 'Lebanese don't have direct political representation because they cannot hold elective political office; on account of the law' (Michael 2025). Section 43 2(a) of the 2022 Public Elections Act clearly states that to be nominated as a presidential candidate, for example, you must be a citizen at birth, although there has been progress in relation to other elective office with regards to who can aspire to office (AYV News 2025), with dual nationals now eligible.

Citizenship by naturalization in Sierra Leone is shaped by racial qualifications. Whereas 'Negro-Africans' can acquire citizenship following eight years of continuous residency, 'non-Negro-Africans' face more restrictive rules for naturalization (Manby 2016) and typically have to be a resident for 15 years before becoming eligible.

On the whole, FGD participants suggested that the political nation is inclusive and that there is public agreement on a common citizenship without discrimination. However, some made mention that the citizenship of Fullah and Lebanese people is sometimes questioned or debated. From comments obtained at the FGD for elders in the Western Area Rural, the FGD for youth in Freetown and the FGD for youth in Kono District, there are people opposed to granting the Lebanese 'full citizenship', as they described it. At the FGD for elders in the Western Area Rural, a participant voiced opposition to 'full citizenship' for the Lebanese on the grounds that it would amount to empowering a group that is already economically dominant.

*Are cultural differences acknowledged and how well are minorities and vulnerable social groups protected?*

- Cultural differences are acknowledged and protected against discrimination in law and practice, including protection of minorities and vulnerable groups.

Cultural differences are acknowledged and protected in the country's constitution.<sup>5</sup> In practice too, cultural differences are acknowledged and there is no systematic attempt by the state to discriminate against any group's way of life. Sierra Leone has consistently been viewed as an exemplar for religious tolerance in practice—religious discrimination is also prohibited in law—with communities regularly celebrating each other's holidays. Equally, at community level and in interactions between people, conflict in the country hardly ever arises out of cultural contestation. FGD respondents did not feel constrained by their ethnic and religious identities (Sierra Leone has 16 ethnic groups) anywhere in the country, including places far away from their homes. Ells agreed that apart from language, there is very little difference in the cultures of the ethnic groups in the country (Lecturer 1 2025). One explanation offered is that inter-marriages, proximity of communities and assimilation have made it difficult to find Sierra Leoneans whose genealogy can be restricted to only one ethnic group (Bangura 2015).

The rights of gender and sexual minority (GSM) citizens are not enshrined in law, with same-sex activity still prohibited under colonial era legislation (Human Dignity Trust 2024). Although the application of the law in practice is limited, GSM citizens face widespread discrimination when it comes to accessing services, securing employment or expressing their rights; the law does not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics (US Dept. of State 2023).

#### *How much consensus is there on the boundaries of the state and constitutional arrangements?*

- **Sierra Leone is a unitary state and there is consensus on the country's boundaries.**

There is consensus on the state's boundaries and there has never been an instance of certain groups wanting to belong to a neighbouring country or seeking independence. Equally, there has been no instance of a government of Sierra Leone laying claim to territory outside the country's borders. However, the town of Yenga, a part of Sierra Leone prior to the civil war, remains a point of territorial contestation with Guinea whose forces occupied it when helping the government fight the rebels during the civil war and never left (BBC 2012). The most recent flare up in April 2025 saw an increased military presence around the town, with ongoing dialogue being part of efforts to find a negotiated resolution (ONS 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Section 12 of the 1991 Constitution, and the provisions for the protection of fundamental human rights under chapter 3.

*How far do constitutional and political arrangements enable major societal divisions to be moderated or reconciled?*

- There are no constitutional provisions for moderating or reconciling of major societal divisions; rather there are temporary mechanisms and institutional structures—with varying degrees of effectiveness in achieving this.

The Constitution does not contain specific mechanisms for dealing with societal divisions, but institutional, and to a large extent temporary, political arrangements and structures have been devised with this purpose.

Following the end of civil conflict in 2002, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established which aimed to create an impartial record of the abuses and violations that occurred during the decade long conflict and had, as one its core goals, a commitment to provide an opportunity for healing and reconciliation. Similarly, following the contested 2023 elections that resulted in a boycott of all legislative institutions by the APC, an Agreement for National Unity was reached by the two main parties, providing a forum through which political divisions could be resolved through dialogue, with regional partners and national institutions acting as guarantors.

A key national institution in this process, created in 2021, is the Independent National Commission for Peace and Cohesion (INCP). This body has a mandate dedicated to promoting reconciliation, peacebuilding and national cohesion, much like the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL, created in 1977). However, the ability of these two entities to maintain sufficient distance and independence from government makes it difficult for them to play this reconciliatory role.

*How impartial and inclusive are the procedures for amending the Constitution?*

- While the provisions and procedures for amending the Constitution are impartial and inclusive in law, ruling parties have been able to obtain a majority of representation in Parliament by unconventional means—with implications for amendments.

Parliament has the sole power to amend the Constitution, with the provisions and procedures spelt out in the 1991 text. A change to the Constitution requires at least a two-thirds majority vote of sitting MPs, a share of seats which no party has been able to secure through elections since 2007—even with the votes of chieftaincy representatives in the legislature traditionally aligning with the

government of the day. This has meant that for amendments proposed by the ruling party or the executive to pass, the party holding the most seats needs to secure the support of smaller parties, when represented, or to gain considerable cross-party consensus. Only with the backing of MPs from outside its party has the government been able to secure amendments to allow dual citizens to stand for parliament, for example, and to enable changes to the composition of the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL).<sup>6</sup>

Opposition MPs have the right to propose changes to the Constitution through private member bills. However, since the country's return to multiparty democracy, no constitutional amendment proposal has come from an opposition MP.

Sierra Leone has seen several constitutional review processes in the multiparty era, and these have featured sustained, extensive and regular public consultation. However, the acceptance and application of those presented in 2017, for example, was limited—with the government rejecting over three-quarters of the proposed ideas when issuing its white paper (UN 2022). The most recent constitutional review process has again sought to ensure extensive public participation. This began in 2022 and remains ongoing at the time of writing.

*Does the government respect its international obligations in its treatment of refugees and asylum seekers and how free from arbitrary discrimination is its immigration policy?*

- *Sierra Leone respects international obligations in respect of protections for refugees and asylum seekers.*

Although as far back as 1981 the country acceded to both the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, it was not until 2007 that a law for the protection of refugees was enacted domesticating these commitments. In 2022, through the National Commission for Social Action, Sierra Leone assumed full responsibility for refugee protection (UNHCR n.d.) although its asylum system faces ongoing challenges related to limited resources and a lack of institutional capacity.

<sup>6</sup> See the Constitution of Sierra Leone (Amendment) Act 2021, in respect of dual citizens; and the Constitution of Sierra Leone (Amendment) Act 2022, in respect of the ECSL.

During the civil war in Liberia, which started in 1990, tens of thousands of refugees from that country, and others in the Mano River Union, took refuge in Sierra Leone. But the country has not faced a significant refugee challenge since, and the number of individuals seeking asylum or refugee status in the country is very low as of 2025.

Sierra Leone's immigration policy is largely free from arbitrary discrimination. As a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) it adheres to the ECOWAS freedom of movement protocol (1979) meaning that citizens of other West African states have the right to enter, reside and work.

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## 5.2. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

### Overview

In a democracy voluntary, self-organized, self-regulated intermediary groups independent of the state are key to political participation. Operating on the basis of shared rules and the legal order, such groups offer prospects for the continuity and consolidation of democracy in many ways—including through checking the abuse of power, bringing people closer to political and governance processes, normalizing social bargaining and promoting accountable government.

The 1991 Constitution protects political participation in Sierra Leone under various provisions including those on elections, civil and political liberties, and local government. In practice, citizens enjoy freedom to self-organize and form associations of diverse types; many respondents to the present study were members of voluntary associations, trade unions, professional bodies and welfare organizations. Whilst voluntary associations and welfare organizations operate largely without hindrance, professional bodies and unions are regularly targeted for co-option by the two dominant political parties.

*How extensive is the range of voluntary associations, citizens' groups and social movements, and how independent are they from government?*

- Sierra Leone has an extensive range of voluntary associations, citizens' groups, trade unions and social movements—but it is common for them to be in alliance with the ruling or opposition parties.



The landscape of Sierra Leonean civil society is vibrant, with numerous voluntary and citizen associations of different types, sizes and interests across the country. Expert informants agree that the legal framework is generally conducive to the existence of such bodies and there is rarely interference by government to disrupt or limit their operations (Lecturer 1 2025; Yeama Ahmed 2025; Programme Manager, CGG 2025). However, in December 2018 the 'Development Cooperation Framework' (or NGO Policy) required CSOs to sign a service level agreement with respective sector lead ministries before they could commence operations, to renew registration every two years and to have their work verified in the field by the government. These requirements (still in place under 2023–2028 iteration of the policy) have been criticized by CSOs as a tool 'to unduly control CSOs, narrow the civic space, and potentially silence dissenting voices' (Programme Manager, CGG 2025). Failure to comply with the provisions of the policy can lead to sanctions.<sup>7</sup>

In a 2022 communique National Elections Watch (NEW, a civil society consortium) asserted that 'there have been attempts, since the 2018 elections, to shrink the civic space using various approaches' (ICNL 2023) Co-option is one of those approaches. There are compelling examples that some CSO actors are complicit in colluding with political interests. One report (IGR 2024) lays out how CSOs are incentivized: 'by giving compliant organizations contracts, appointments on lucrative boards and overseas trips, CSOs and media are co-opted to be silent on state injustices and corruption'. In an attempt to undermine their independence and credibility, organizations that are critical of the government are regularly challenged by the state as acting as agents of political opposition.

Social movements and trade unions are likewise susceptible to co-option by political parties. According to one expert informant: 'The unions are free to operate, but they are not independent... government always tries to influence the election of leaders in those organizations so that they can be influenced' (Yeama Ahmed 2025). At the meeting to validate the SoD report, organizations like the Sierra Leone Bar Association, the National Union of Sierra Leone Students and the Motor Drivers and General Transport Workers Union were mentioned by participants as key targets of political parties' co-optation. Participants said that it was common for the two main parties to back candidates at elections for the leadership of these organizations.

<sup>7</sup> See the National NGO Policy Framework 2023–2028 (Ministry of Planning and Economic Development 2023).

In the Sierra Leone Bar Association's (SLBA) elections in 2024, two competing camps emerged headed by candidates openly backed by political parties. Both women, the two candidates each had deep party roots. On the ruling party side, the candidate's late father was a minister in the SLPP government and a lawyer for the party. The candidate was a party member and at the time of the elections, Chairperson of the board of the National Revenue Authority. On the opposition side, the candidate's late father was a minister in the APC government and a lawyer for the party; she was also a member of the APC and someone who regularly offered pro-bono representation for opposition supporters in court. The election of the ruling party-backed candidate was highly contested, with nine former presidents of the SLBA jointly writing a letter calling for its annulment given allegations of violence and disenfranchisement accompanying the election process (Sorie 2024). The politicization of such professional bodies limits their ability to provide impartial assessments or statements on key sectoral developments.

*How extensive is citizen participation in voluntary associations, mutual benefit/peer-support groups and other voluntary public activities?*

- Citizens' participation in voluntary associations, mutual benefit/peer-support groups and other voluntary public activities is very extensive in the country.

In mutual benefit groups, members put resources together for self-help purposes including access to credit or farm labour. In faith-based groups, members undertake voluntary community work and help to raise funds. In descendant associations, ethnic organizations and informal settlement development groups, members contribute towards financing development activities and infrastructure in their place of origin or community.

Across the different demographics engaged, respondents in all communities demonstrated that membership of voluntary associations is very popular. Nearly every person belonged to one or two voluntary associations. The array of voluntary, self-managed groups to which people belonged included artisan trades unions, mutual benefit associations, faith-based groups, ethnic organizations, social clubs, student unions, descendant associations and community-level branches of rights-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

### 5.3. THE MEDIA IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

#### Overview

The media best supports democracy when ownership of outlets is plural, diverse voices in society are represented, it is free from coercion and control by the state and private interests, and it can be easily accessed by the population. With these attributes, the media space enables citizens to obtain information for informed engagement with governance and political processes, and to exchange views on matters of public interest.

Beyond occasional clashes between individual media practitioners and powerful interests, there is no systematic attempt by the state to muzzle the media in Sierra Leone. The country climbed eight places in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index to 56th out of 180 countries (RSF 2025). However, the media's effectiveness is stifled on key fronts, including vulnerability to political influence and corruption, and the fact that television and newspapers have very limited reach outside the capital city.

#### *How independent is the media from government?*

- The media in Sierra Leone is somewhat independent from government, but many outlets are owned by politically aligned or involved individuals who influence the direction of coverage.

Section 25 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone comprises specific provisions for protection of freedom of expression and the media including freedom to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions. There is no systematic effort by the state to stifle the independence of the media; the legislative independence of the Independent Media Commission (IMC) has been strengthened by the passage of a new IMC Act in 2020 and accompanying regulations in 2022. However, a particular challenge facing the IMC is its ability to effectively determine the beneficial ownership of media entities registered with it. Furthermore, the number of outlets has grown significantly in recent years, as media publications become de facto mouthpieces for individual politicians or political agendas rather than credible sources of news or analysis.

Whilst rural respondents engaged for the SoD could not easily attest to the legal or beneficiary ownership of media institutions, the predominant belief among rural people is that media institutions are not independent but controlled by 'unseen hands', a phrase repeatedly used by FGD participants. In various FGDs, both in rural and urban

communities, the ‘unseen hands’ are understood to be politicians and powerful businessmen who own some of these media outlets and have the influence to shape the content it produces.

*How pluralistic is media ownership, how well does the media represent different opinions, and how easily can citizens’ access the media?*

- Media ownership is plural and the media represents different opinions, but citizens’ access to the media is very low.

The media in Sierra Leone is generally plural, with ownership of outlets representing diverse interests including communities, religious bodies, non-profit organizations, individuals and corporate entities.<sup>8</sup> People’s access to this array of media outlets varies widely, however, and is shaped by demographic and geographical factors. A 2022 BBC Media Action Report found that 69 per cent of people in the country listen to radio at least once a week—the most accessible form of media. The second most common way of accessing media was through the internet—which had grown from 13 per cent to 32 per cent between 2019 and 2022 as internet coverage and affordability improved. The Internet continues to be an avenue for circulating content produced for other media formats as well as facilitating the spread of information into offline word-of-mouth networks (Sowa 2022). Only 28 per cent watched television and 7 per cent read newspapers (BBC 2022). Based on the FGD conversations, print and broadcast media consumption was more common among residents of Freetown. Direct access to social media for news and information is also more prevalent in large towns, and among younger residents. Overall, the information ecosystem is increasingly shaped by the prominence of digital platforms, creating both direct and indirect consumers of digital content (see: Gadjanova et al. 2022).

*How effective is the media in investigating government and powerful corporations?*

- The media in the country is not effective in investigating government and powerful corporations.

In the opinion of expert informants, the media in Sierra Leone is more inclined to report official news, human interest stories and advertorials than investigate government or powerful corporations to expose wrongdoing (Manika Kamara 2025; Lecturer 1 2025;

<sup>8</sup> By December 2022 there were 214 active radio stations, 18 active television stations, 7 direct to home services, and 138 active newspapers in the country (Shaw and Sowa 2022).

Programme Manager, CGG 2025). Notwithstanding the occasional investigation, the media is hampered by the general political culture in the country in which politicians, public officials and other powerful actors see journalists and media institutions as tools to be used to promote their private interests (Manika Kamara 2025). The President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) elaborated the point as follows: ‘journalists and media institutions are therefore, to be co-opted or disdained’—with reports framed as ‘investigations’ often being attempts on the part of media owners, or those willing to pay, to settle scores with political opponents (Manika Kamara 2025).

Corruption and political patronage are powerful means of upward social mobility in Sierra Leone, and therefore ‘it makes sense for many journalists to abandon a sense of public duty in favour of political benefits’ (Manika Kamara 2025). Expert informants agreed that this political culture makes it common practice for big businesses to buy media coverage to promote their agendas and more occasionally, for the police to act against journalists on behalf of politicians, public officials and other powerful people (Manika Kamara 2025; Lecturer 1 2025; Programme Manager, CGG 2025). Another expert informant (Lecturer 2) explained that in the context of high levels of illiteracy, poverty and an economy dominated by the informal sector, opportunities for the media to make money by selling products to the population are very restricted. Consequently, media operations in the country are generally small businesses, relying mostly on payments for advertisements from government agencies and projects—and therefore lack the resources, and in some cases the political appetite, for investigative journalism. It was against this background that the National Fund for Public Interest Media project was launched in April 2025 under the auspices of the Media Reform Coordinating Group, but it has not yet had sufficient time to make a notable impact (Lecturer 2 2025).

#### *How free are journalists from restrictive laws, harassment and intimidation?*

- Generally, journalists are not subjected to restrictive laws in the country and harassment and intimidation backed by the state or organized interests is infrequent.

In 2020, the government abolished the 1965 Public Order Act which made libel a criminal offence. Media practitioners had for decades labelled the Act as ‘anti-free press’. However, the introduction of a Cyber Security and Crime Act (2021) led to SLAJ expressing concern that vague provisions and a lack of clear definitions in the legislation mean it could be used to target critical commentators

(Conteh 2022). SLAJ has also raised a number of concerns over the proposed Counter Terrorism Act—which has passed legislative scrutiny and awaits presidential assent—highlighting that provisions in the bill ‘could be used to penalize journalists and put them at risk of prosecution’ (SLAJ 2025).

There have been several instances of journalists being detained and investigated under the Cyber Security and Crimes Act (MFWA 2025; EUSEE 2025) although on the whole, expert informants reported that harassment of media houses or professionals by the state or organized groups was uncommon (Manika Kamara 2025; Lecturer 1 2025; Programme Manager, CGG 2025).

#### *How free are private citizens from intrusion and harassment by the media?*

- Generally, private citizens are not subject to intrusion and harassment by the media.

Apart from occasional instances of misconduct by individual media practitioners, private citizens are generally not subjected to intrusion and harassment by the media. Expert informants reported that in those (rare) instances where an individual media practitioner has harassed a private citizen, they have mostly been driven by motives to extort the victim, with gender dimensions also playing an amplifying role in some cases. In the community engagements in Freetown, few people mentioned such behaviours or confirmed that they had heard of them.

Social media is, however, a major contributor to the unease, unrest and political anxiety that the country has faced since 2018 (IGR 2023). Hate speech, propaganda and misinformation on social media is a worrying trend in Sierra Leone, according to submissions from the communities engaged. At the FGDs for youth in the capital city and other large towns, participants confirmed that negative political social media content is a source of quarrels, arguments and anxieties among young people in their communities—including individuals being targeted and harassed on these platforms. Prominent voices online are subject to attacks from politically aligned bloggers. Expert informants agreed that hate speech, propaganda and misinformation on social media is a worrying trend in Sierra Leone (Manika Kamara 2025; Lecturer 1 2025; Programme Manager, CGG 2025).

In June 2024 a young female lawyer, Joy Baryoh, was arrested and detained under the Cyber Security And Crime Act 2021 on charges of cyber stalking and bullying—for questioning the legitimacy of President Bio and the recently elected head of the Sierra Leone Bar Association in a social media post. Although she was subsequently released without charge, civic liberties advocates criticized the police for the dangerous precedent set by Baryoh’s arrest and the impact it could have on freedom of expression online (MFWA 2024).

## 5.4. THE DEMOCRATIC ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

### Overview

In a democracy, political parties are the mechanisms through which citizens can self-organize on a common platform to legally compete for power and on winning election, sustain a government. Thus, institutionalization of party competition is an important indicator of a modern democracy (Diamond et al. 1997: 137). Parties make further, fundamental contributions to democracy, not least in driving processes of governance reform, both system-wide and in their own internal structures and policies (Farrell 2025). Therefore, when parties are in trouble, democracy is in decline.

In Sierra Leone, the right of political parties to exist and operate is guaranteed—but smaller entities are inhibited by financial challenges and an electoral system which places a high threshold for legislative participation. Although there were 17 registered parties at the time of the SoD assessment, Sierra Leone is dominated by two main political forces: the APC and SLPP. At least a dozen political parties have appeared and disappeared over the past decade—many of them offshoots of the two main parties—unable to exist beyond one electoral cycle or the political career of their founder. The two dominant parties have large and steady membership bases, mostly recruited based on family ties, friendship with politicians, ethnic affinities and hopes of material benefits. The leaders and a few other powerful men and women are largely in control of these parties, although both now have constitutions that strengthen internal party democracy provisions. All political parties in the country largely disrespect the rules on fundraising and campaign financing with no consequences (Jabbie 2024; Lavalì 2017).

*How freely are parties able to form and to recruit members, engage with the public and campaign for office?*

- In law and in practice, it is somewhat easy for citizens to organize and form political parties, recruit members and campaign at elections.

Section 35 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone recognizes the rights of political parties to exist and participate in shaping the political will of the people, and to sponsor candidates for presidential, parliamentary and local government elections. By law, political parties are to have a national character, and no political party is allowed to organize based on race, tribe, gender, region or religion. Both major parties are nevertheless strongly aligned with their ethno-regional bases (Northern-Themne/Limba for the APC and Southern-Mende for the SLPP). This pattern was reflected in the FGDs, with people generally identifying themselves with the dominant party in their region, even though most were not members. People mostly support parties as the result of family ties, friendship with politicians, ethnic affinities and hopes for material benefits.

Expert informants generally agreed that the legal framework pertaining to the existence and operation of political parties is conducive to democracy (Lecturer 1 2025; Fuad Kanu 2025; Programme Manager, CGG 2025). Since the return of multiparty politics, no party has been refused registration, and no party has been banned. However, there have been concerns raised that the introduction of a high threshold (11.9 per cent) for securing seats in the legislature ahead of the 2023 elections is an undue restriction on the electoral chances of smaller parties—impacting civil and political rights and ethnic divisions (Carter Center 2023a).

Expert informants generally agreed that political parties largely operate freely and are subject only to reasonable oversight linked to clear and legitimate public interest (Lecturer 1 2025; Fuad Kanu 2025; Programme Manager, CGG 2025). However, this can be threatened during election periods when opposition parties are at greater risk of their engagement with voters being disrupted by security agencies, with those agencies being more accommodating for the incumbents (Rashid Thomas 2023).

#### *How effective is the party system in forming and sustaining governments in office?*

- Sierra Leone's de facto two-party democracy has been effective in sustaining governments in office; and the two dominant parties have taken turns to form government upon winning elections.

Sierra Leone has a presidential system of government where the President is both head of state and head of government. Although multiple parties contest every general election, the APC and the SLPP have dominated the politics of the country since the return to multiparty democracy at the end of the war in 2002. They are the only



two parties represented in parliament following the 2023 election.<sup>9</sup> The party of the incumbent president has always secured the most seats, even if following the 2018 election that was only the case after a contested legal process (in which 10 parliamentary results were overturned, which shifted the balance of power from the APC to the SLPP) (Enria and Hitchen 2019).

Government has changed hands between the two parties through elections on two occasions: 2007 and 2018.

*How effective are parties' membership organizations, and can members influence party policy and candidate selection?*

- Only the two dominant political parties have been able to sustain large membership bases over the years; party strongmen largely dictate policy and determine candidate selection (see: Jabbie 2024).

Expert informants noted that a key challenge with political parties since the return to multi-party politics is their over-reliance on their founding leaders or other prominent figures (Fuad Kanu 2025; Lecturer 1 2025). At least a dozen parties have appeared and disappeared in the last two decades as their founders either retired, died or crossed over/back to the APC or SLPP. Many such parties arose as the result of conflicts over elections of the leadership of the APC and SLPP—for example the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), Coalition for Change, and National Grand Coalition (NGC). Those at the apex of the dominant parties seek to control the trajectory of the party. For example, Ernest Bai Koroma remained chairperson and leader of the party throughout the two terms he served as President and only voluntarily resigned the position in April 2022, four years after leaving office as President.

As a result of these dynamics and choices, the two main parties (besides others) have internal democracy challenges that are decades-old. Since the return to democratic order in 2002 both have changed their constitutions at least four times, often either to reverse power grab provisions obtained by a previous leader, or to insert them. For decades the constitution of the APC provided two options—selection by consensus or an election—by which the party decided its presidential candidate at general elections. In the aftermath of the 2018 elections, the option to select a presidential candidate (rather than delegates electing one) was the subject of contestations within

<sup>9</sup> Not including the 14 chieftaincy representatives for districts (not excluding western area) which are elected through limited franchise and have always voted with the ruling government.

The two main political parties that have dominated multiparty politics in the country remain bedevilled by internal democracy challenges that often result in disaffection and even defections. In the 2007 elections, outgoing President Ahmad Tejan-Kabbah played an influential role in determining the flagbearer and running-mate of the party. A disaffected faction split as a result, forming the PMDC which acted as a kingmaker in the run-off election and was key to the APC's overall victory. Similarly, at the APC national delegates convention in October 2017, outgoing President Ernest Koroma selected Samura Kamura as the flagbearer of the APC. Although this did not create any formal splits in the party, these had already emerged in 2015 when Koroma forced vice-President Sam Sumana out as part of his efforts to maintain his grip on the choice of his successor. Sumana then formed the Coalition for Change which won a significant share of the vote in the key swing district of Kono. Although he did not formally align himself with the SLPP, the district voted heavily for the opposition in protest at the treatment of Sumana.

the party. This ultimately led to its removal in an extensive reform of the APC's internal constitution. The SLPP has historically enjoyed a greater degree of internal democracy, with its nationwide delegates being key voting blocs to be won by anyone seeking to become a presidential candidate. This has also increased the risk of factional splits, for example those that birthed the PMDC in 2007 and NGC in 2017.

Parties' selection of aspirant MPs is also opaque, with financial inducements to secure the support and allegiance of party officials at district level viewed as more decisive than popular membership support. Following the shift to a proportional representation district bloc electoral system ahead of the 2023 elections, candidates' positions on lists are submitted to the electoral authorities by a select number of key party officials, accentuating this lack of transparency (Jabbie 2024).

In youth FGDs, attempts to rig primaries and resultant violence during these contests were widely cited as indicating a lack of internal party democracy. Participants largely agreed that candidates who won in such circumstances were backed by powerful figures within the party with influence over the district and even national structures. The general perception expressed by FGD participants was that if a candidate is selected or elected who is not the preferred candidate of powerful people within the party, the results were likely to be nullified, and a new election or process held. The implication being that internal democracy provisions largely provide legitimacy for outcomes pre-determined by candidates' resources and party backing.

*How far does the system of party financing prevent the subordination of parties to special interests?*

- Regulations regarding political party financing to forestall the dominance of special interests are generally flouted.

Rules and guidelines regarding how political parties receive funds and utilize them for campaign purposes are laid out in the Political Parties Act 2022, which established the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC). The act forbids people who are not qualified to vote at elections in Sierra Leone from making donations to any political party in kind or cash. Political parties are required by law to submit declarations of their assets, funds and liabilities to the PPRC. The Act also gives powers to the PPRC to set limits on contributions and ask parties to disclose the sources of their funds. But the PPRC is yet to publish regulations on either (a) campaign funding limits; or (b) disclosure of sources of campaign and party finances.

The Commission also has the power, on paper, to investigate a political party regarding sources and use of party funds—but in practice it has yet to demonstrate any substantive powers of enforcement. There was agreement among expert informants that Political Parties Act provisions are consistently flouted and that the financing of political parties and campaigns remains largely unregulated (Carter Center 2023b: 34). As one EI argued, ‘the fact that the APC and SLPP have never challenged each other on party or campaign financing suggests they are both not serious about the rules’ (Programme Manager, CGG 2025).

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## 5.5. FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

### Overview

In a democracy, credible elections are a critical means by which a country achieves government ‘by the people’, in its truest sense. Therefore, free and fair elections that allow the people to express their free will as to who gets to govern, from among competing, legitimate contenders, is a key indicator for measuring the quality of democracy in a country.

The 1991 Constitution guarantees independence of the ECSL, albeit its leadership is appointed by the executive, to conduct all public elections and referenda. Sierra Leone’s voter registration and voting procedures are generally designed and implemented to allow inclusivity and accessibility, although challenges can be faced

by citizens on account of literacy and other access challenges. Generally, citizens have shown sustained support for elections by turning out in large numbers to register and to vote. The credibility of the electoral process and results have nonetheless been challenged in court by the losing party at all the general elections held since the country's return to multiparty politics. The only exception was in 2023 when the APC, mistrustful of the judiciary to provide a fair hearing, chose to boycott legislative institutions at the national and district level (Harding 2023).

*Is the appointment to governmental and legislative offices determined by popular competitive elections and how frequently do elections lead to a change in the governing parties or personnel?*

- Voters' ballots at elections have remained the only means by which a government has come into office in Sierra Leone over the past two decades.

Sierra Leone has held routine, multiparty general elections every five years, through which a winning party has received the mandate to form government and deliver its agenda. On two occasions—2007 and 2018—the ruling party has lost at the polls and ultimately accepted the outcome. In both the incumbent president was not on the ballot due to already having served the maximum two terms of office.

Afrobarometer survey data from 2025 further finds that 78 per cent of citizens see democracy as their preferred form of government (Afrobarometer 2025a)—a preference shared by communities engaged for the SoD report, who contended that winning elections should remain the only means for any government to come into office.

*How inclusive and accessible for all citizens are the registration and voting procedures, how independent are they from government or party control, and how free are they from intimidation and abuse?*

- Voter registration and voting procedures are generally designed and implemented to enable inclusivity and accessibility. However, these procedures can nevertheless pose difficulties for many people on account of illiteracy, poverty, poor transportation networks and, on the part of the ECSL, logistical challenges.

The ECSL is vested with powers to register voters, demarcate constituencies, conduct polling, and count and announce results. The

fact that its figurehead is appointed by the executive continues to pose a challenge to its perceived and actual independence.

Political parties often mobilize to support registration processes for their supporters. In the view of FGD respondents in Kambia district (among others), ‘without the APC or SLPP mobilizing us with transportation, in some villages in this district people would not have been able to take part in elections’.

Concerns about the voter registration process in 2023 centred on the limited windows for re-verification and first-time registrations, the consistency of applying legal provisions on registration requirements and lack of transparency in the verification and finalizing of the electoral register produced by ECSL (Rashid Thomas 2022). A Cross-Party Committee on Electoral Systems and Management Bodies Review also known as the Tripartite Committee was set up to look into the grievances around the 2023 elections, consisting of representatives of the ruling party, the opposition and the international community. Among the recommendations in its report was that an audit of the voter register be conducted six months before an election, as part of efforts to reduce these concerns in future polls (Cross-party Committee on Electoral Systems and Management Bodies Review 2024).

*How fair are the procedures for registration of candidates and parties, and how open is access to the media and other means of communication with the voters?*

- The procedures for registration of candidates and parties are fair in law and practice, while access to means of communication with voters is not fair in practice.

The procedures for registration of candidates and parties and guarantees of access to means of political communication are laid out in the Political Parties Regulation Commission Act, 2022. The laws do not have any caveats that favour or disfavour different parties and candidates regarding party and candidates’ registration procedures (Fuad Kanu 2025; Lecturer 1 2025). Presidential aspirants are required to deposit NLE 36,000 (USD 1,500) in order to be eligible to contest.

Following the passage of the Gender Empowerment and Women’s Equality Act (GEWE Act; 2022) party lists had to include at least one female candidate for every three candidates on party list submitted to ECSL in 2023, a requirement that was largely adhered to by the leading parties.

When it comes to media access and communication with voters, the APC and SLPP dominate and can use their connections to politically aligned media houses to their advantage. With no limitation imposed on campaign expenditure, the APC and SLPP were by far the biggest spenders in the 2023 elections—mostly on rallies, outdoor platforms and radio broadcasts. Further, many community radio stations sold their prime-time spots to these parties, or publicly rallied behind the APC or SLPP, effectively crowding out smaller parties (Carter Center 2023b). Two expert informants stated that the use of public radio for campaign purposes has always been monopolized by the party in power (Fuad Kanu 2025; Lecturer 1 2025). Only a few well-established media entities strive to provide more balanced coverage that gives airtime to other perspectives, and these are largely confined to a Freetown audience.

With regards to the views of participants about the 2023 elections, for instance, FGDs in rural areas were mostly of the view that only the two main parties had a communications presence in their communities—largely through posters and T-shirts, and to a lesser extent via community radio. FGDs in Bombali, Kailahun and Kenema reported that it was common to see the campaign materials of only one party in some communities.

*How effective a range of choice does the electoral and party system allow the voters, how equally do their votes count, and how closely does the composition of the legislature and the selection of the executive reflect the choices they make?*

- At election time political parties rarely offer competing policy or ideological commitments and voters are instead left to choose between the two dominant parties mostly on the basis of ethnic and regional affinities, family ties or the pursuit of rewards.

Although the two long-established parties evolved around distinct social groups,<sup>10</sup> neither the APC or SLPP promote ideas that attempt to aggregate the interests of particular social groups, nor do they pursue distinct ideological programmes (while in office or opposition). One election observation report on the 2023 elections made the point that there was nothing to distinguish between the manifesto pledges made by the APC and the SLPP, describing them as a 'hodgepodge of technocratic proposals' (Carter Center 2023b: 36). During elections, political parties in Sierra Leone rarely seek votes by outlining clear policy choices for the populace. Although leading

10 The SLPP was founded by people mainly from chieftaincy backgrounds and educated at the premier schools at the time. The APC was founded by people from ordinary backgrounds.

parties publish manifestos, these are not popularized and so have little to no impact on voter's decisions; none of the participants in community engagements for the SoD had ever set eyes on a political party's manifesto.

Expert informants agreed that both the APC and SLPP enjoy what amount to fixed ethno-regional strongholds (Fuad Kanu 2025; Lecturer 1 2025). What is key for electoral success, therefore, is to ensure high turnout in those strongholds and to focus on increasing performance in the historical 'swing states' of Kono and Western Area (Rural and Urban) (Conteh 2014).

Whilst the district block PR system introduced for the 2023 election created a parliament broadly reflective of the vote share and as between the SLPP and the APC, the high threshold for winning a seat (11.9 per cent in any district—see 5.4 above) wiped out smaller parties such as the NGC and Coalition for Change which in the 2018–2023 legislature had held eight and four seats, respectively. Significant concerns were raised by domestic and international observers about the credibility of the results announced by ECSL in 2023 (see: EU EOM 2023; Carter Center 2023b).

#### *How well does the legislature reflect the social composition of the electorate?*

- The composition of Parliament somewhat reflects the social composition of the electorate.

Previously older men dominated the seats in parliament, but following the introducing of the GEWE Act in 2022, the 2023 elections saw women win 30.4 per cent of directly elected seats in the legislature. However, despite constituting nearly 40 per cent of the total population (Stats SL 2017), young people are poorly represented in the legislative body. Only 2 per cent of MPs were under the age of 30 years following the 2023 elections (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) n.d). However, there were mixed views among FGD respondents about young people's preparedness for politics, with some arguing that 'youths are not ready yet', or 'youths need experience'. A former Minister of Information publicly made a statement that the youth should focus on helping themselves first, getting education and showing that they are responsible people rather than asking to lead people.<sup>11</sup> Young FGD respondents, on the other hand, raised concerns about their underrepresentation in parliament and local councils.

<sup>11</sup> Statement by Julius Spencer, former Minister of Information and Communication, at the 'Consultative Session on the Preferred Electoral System', 21 June 2025.

The high costs involved with seeking political office—estimated to be US 20,000 in a recent Cost of Politics report (Jabbie 2024)—also shape who is able to win elections, with parliament largely composed of those from the middle and upper echelons of society.

*What proportion of the electorate votes and how are the election results accepted by all political forces in the country and outside?*

- Voter turnout has been consistently high since the first post-war elections in 2002, with results consistently challenged but through legal channels. However, none of these contestations in court have been successful with the outcome leading to the polls being overturned.

At the five general elections held since the first post-war elections in 2002, voter turnout has consistently averaged over 80 per cent. Evidence obtained for the SoD report from engagement with communities confirms high enthusiasm among citizens to vote at elections. One expert informant stated that people are motivated to participate as they believe that voting can shape governance that is responsive to their welfare needs and national development expectations (NEW 2025).

Since 2002, no election in the country has been accepted without the losing party challenging the credibility of the electoral process or the results. 2023 notwithstanding, these largely peaceful challenges have been channelled, unsuccessfully, through petitions to the courts rather than through mobilizing supporters to protest. In 2023 however, the APC, mistrustful of the courts' ability to deliver an impartial verdict, chose to pursue a boycott of representative institutions to register its concerns about the lack of disaggregated election data produced by ECSL and a general lack of openness during vote tabulation. Concerns about the credibility of the election results presented in 2023 were shared by domestic and international observers who contended that opacity in the counting and tabulation of the results had created statistical inconsistencies in the results announced (EU EOM 2023; Carter Center 2023b).

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## 5.6. THE DEMOCRATIC EFFECTIVENESS OF PARLIAMENT

### Overview

Fundamental to a healthy democracy is the effective functioning of parliament—a duly constituted body of representatives of the people



as the law-making arm of government, which keeps the executive in check and accountable, otherwise known as the legislature.

The effectiveness of Parliament in Sierra Leone—composed of 135 directly elected representative and 14 indirectly elected chieftaincy representatives—to support the quality of democracy is problematic in critical areas. These include (a) Parliament’s ability to retain freedom from executive influence; and (b) members’ very limited regard for their obligations to consult with constituents and to attend parliamentary sittings.

*How independent is Parliament from control of the executive, and how freely are its members able to express their opinions?*

- The executive has significant control over parliament, and the freedom of expression of all members can be stifled.

In the exercise of its functions as the supreme law-making body in the country, the Constitution states that parliament shall not be subject to the direction of any other authority. However, in reality the parliamentary agenda can be shaped to the will of the executive, a feature that has persisted throughout administrations in the post-war era, with Parliament largely acting as a rubber stamp for the executive’s wishes when it comes to things like appointments. When it comes to things like public financial management, rather than parliament scrutinizing the executive, it is more likely that the latter (or the leadership of political parties) will put pressure on MPs from all parties—either through co-option or even coercion—to reduce and limit scrutiny.

The MPs are generally free to express their opinions and ideas in and out of parliament and there is no systematic effort in rules or practice to stifle their voices. However, while an individual MP may not be prevented from saying what they want to say, there can be consequences for saying things to the disfavour of the party or the executive. They may then be expelled from the party and prevented from contesting future elections on the party’s ticket, ultimately losing their parliamentary seat; Section 77(k) of the 1991 Constitution states that a parliamentarian loses their seat if they lose membership of their party. Expert informants agree that this prospect can lead to control of parliamentarians’ ability to initiate, scrutinize and amend legislation. Occasionally, however, members have voted against the positions favoured by their parties without consequences, and expulsion from a party leading to the loss of a parliamentary seat is very rare (Jengo 2025; Rado Yokie 2025).

*How extensive and effective are the powers of Parliament to initiate, scrutinize and amend legislation?*

- The powers of Parliament to initiate, scrutinize and amend legislation are extensive in law but not effective in practice.

The primary role of the legislature is to make laws. There are grounds, however, to question the quality of the law-making process, which ultimately impacts the quality of the laws that are made. Firstly, the ruling party has always had a majority in parliament and been able to pass laws without having to compromise with the opposition. It is in these circumstances that Parliament has passed mining agreements with international companies that have been criticized as disadvantageous to the country. Between 2009 and 2014 some of the agreements were passed in Parliament under certificates of emergency, meaning that debate was minimal.

*How extensive and effective are the powers of Parliament to oversee the executive and hold it to account?*

- Parliament is ineffective in overseeing the executive and holding it to account, although the 1991 Constitution gives it sufficient powers to do so.

All expert informants interviewed on the matter agreed that the 1991 Constitution gives Parliament sufficient powers for scrutiny and oversight of the executive branch of government. However, respondents were unanimous in their view that parliament was incapable of holding the executive to account. This was echoed also in FGDs—‘We are yet to see Parliament stopping the President from getting his ways’ being a common refrain. The December 2024 vote to sack the Auditor General, a motion put forward by the government after an extensive and politically compromised investigation (*Africa Confidential* 2024), came up in discussions as an example of parliament being used to validate, rather than challenge, the executive’s agenda. The approval of nearly all appointments presented to its appointments committee was another example of the limited scrutiny offered to the executive.

Expert informants agreed that MPs’ ability to check the executive is seriously constrained, citing the fact that some politicians’ attitudes to governance are impacted by a desire for seeking material rewards (Programme Manager, CGG 2025; Fuad Kanu 2025). In a 2025 Afrobarometer survey, 50 per cent of Sierra Leoneans said parliament was corrupt (Afrobarometer 2025b). Whilst instances where individual ruling party MPs have tried to check wrongdoing on

On a BBC Focus on Africa Programme on Wednesday, 9 September 2020, a sitting MP of the ruling party made comments to the effect that it was common for his colleagues in the legislature to ask for money from presidential nominees for appointments in return for approving them. He said it was also common for his colleagues to take favours from public agencies in a manner that compromised them. Investigations into this behaviour by the Anti-Corruption Commission did not result in any prosecutions.

the part of the executive have occurred, these are not the common pattern and have not had notable impacts (Jengo 2025).

*How freely are all political parties and groups able to organize within Parliament and contribute to its work?*

- Freedom of all political parties and groups to organize within Parliament and contribute to its work is generally respected, although one infringement was recorded in early 2025.

There are no laws that seek to restrict the freedom of political parties and groups to organize within Parliament and contribute to its work. Opposition members are represented on, and chair, a range of parliamentary committees that are laid out in section 93 of the Constitution. Parliamentary groups at the time of this report include the Parliamentary Press Gallery, the cross-party Sierra Leone Female Parliamentary Caucus, and the Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians. One expert informant involved with the latter stated that in general, groups organized within Parliament face no restrictions on their work (Programme Manager, CGG 2025). However, in January 2025 the Speaker suspended a member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery from accessing Parliament. SLAJ called this a dangerous precedent and an infringement on the right to free expression (Kef 2025a).<sup>12</sup>

*How extensive are the procedures of Parliament for consulting the public and relevant interests across the range of its work?*

- The procedures of Parliament for consulting with the public and relevant interests across the range of its work are very limited.

Neither the Constitution nor any primary legislation explicitly stipulates parliamentary procedures of this kind. The legislative process as laid out in the Constitution accords literate members of the public opportunities to know the contents of legislative proposals and bills. This includes obligations on Parliament to

publish a proposed bill in the parliamentary gazette at least twice before debate opens on it. Parliament also proactively communicates its activities to the public via the media and has a website that is regularly updated, and which provides details of the agendas for legislative sessions and committee hearings ahead of time. The public broadcaster endeavours from time to time to broadcast sessions of parliament live.

*How well does Parliament provide a forum for deliberation and debate on issues of public concern?*

- The effectiveness of Parliament to serve as a forum for deliberation and debate on issues of public concern is mixed.

All MPs have equal access to the agendas for legislative sessions and committee hearings (which are always published ahead of time) and a debate cannot be held without a set quorum of members in attendance. Expert informants also say there are no discriminatory rules that could potentially limit the effectiveness of MPs to debate.<sup>13</sup> However, Parliament's effectiveness to serve as a forum for deliberation on issues of public concern is compromised at two levels. The first is that 'in Sierra Leone, it seems that our Parliamentarians do not really cherish the job of being a Parliamentarian. The job seems to be second choice, thus attracting the least powerful, influential or talented party members' (Bangura 2025a). Combined with a high turnover of MPs, this creates capacity shortcomings that impact on the quality of debate and deliberation. A second and related reason for the ineffectiveness of parliament in Sierra Leone is the poor attendance of MPs at sittings. In a statement in early May 2025, the Speaker lamented what he described as the habitual absence and lateness of MPs, suggesting that the practice has been going on for 15 years, affecting the ability of parliament to obtain quorum to sit on important matters (Bangura 2025b).

*How accessible are elected members to their constituents?*

- Constituents generally have low access to their elected members.

All communities engaged for this report confirm that constituents generally have very low access to their elected MPs, and that MPs are hardly known to their constituents because of infrequent interaction with them—a situation that appears set to worsen under the new PR system (as MPs no longer represent individual constituencies). MPs have no regular practice of visiting their constituencies, now districts, to hold consultations and share information. The reasons why MPs

<sup>13</sup> All the expert informants interviewed on the subject made the same point.

are hesitant to do this have largely to do with the personal demands for financial help that individuals place on them, as two MPs confirmed (Jenho 2025; Rado Yokie 2025; see also Jabbie 2024). Another expert informant concurred that ‘Parliamentarians are afraid to go to their constituencies because of the pressure the people put on them to attend to personal matters, including school fees, and medical treatment’.<sup>14</sup>

Expert informants agreed that constituents have hardly any physical access to MPs, particularly for purposes of engagement towards aggregating their concerns for presentation in parliament. Although digital tools are providing avenues for more sustained engagement, respondents in the community engagement sessions said they want more frequent opportunities to discuss local development and local political issues with their MPs. People said they see the unwillingness of an MP to visit and discuss issues with them as illustrating underperformance in parliament.

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## 5.7. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

### Overview

The guarantee of economic and social rights in law and practice is at one level something that the state must have to enable democracy to deliver the environment in which individuals can live in dignity. At a second level, democracy itself must deliver economic and social rights outcomes to ensure that individuals live in dignity.

The Constitution of Sierra Leone (sections 7–9) enshrines the protection of the economic and social well-being of its citizens as a fundamental objective of the state. The Constitution commits the state to harness the country’s natural resources to maximize the health, education, social welfare and cultural development of the citizens. Sierra Leone, however, has lingered in the lowest ranks of the UN Human Development Index for decades, the clearest evidence of failures on economic and social rights. On the whole, majority of the population live in dire need of the basic necessities of life with GDP per capita at USD 873.4 in 2024 (World Bank n.d).

Access to formal work is low and can be shaped by ethno-regional politics. Government-backed social security coverage does not extend to those working in the informal sector, the vast majority

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<sup>14</sup> Statement by Julius Spencer, former Minister of Information and Communication, at the ‘Consultative Session on the Preferred Electoral System’ on 21 June 2025.

A reflection of the perception that discrimination shapes access to formal jobs was captured in this July 2022 statement by APC presidential hopeful, Samura Kamara. Addressing supporters in his home district, he said that only ruling party supporters could access jobs, 'If you are a Kamara, you won't get work. If you are Bangura, you won't get work. If you are from Makeni, you won't get work. If you are not from Kenema, Bo, Kailahun, Moyamba, Pujehun, you won't get work. If you don't say "buwa bisseh" [a Mende greeting], you won't get work.'

of the workforce. Provisions to reduce gender discrimination in employment exist but are not consistently applied.

*Is access to work and social security available to all, without discrimination?*

- Sierra Leone's economy is highly informal, with petty trading, artisanal mining, peasant agriculture and unskilled labour services accounting for the livelihood of 86 per cent of the workforce ((UNCDF 2021). The government-backed social security system provides social security insurance only to people in formal employment, therefore covering a very low percentage of the total workforce. Although plans were underway at the time of the SoD report to extend social security insurance to the informal sector they have not yet been realized.

For the vast majority of people who fend for themselves through informal activities, the issue of employment discrimination does not arise. In public institutions, however, perceptions are strong that over the past decade a pattern has emerged whereby people lose jobs on account of 'identity politics' whereby changeovers of political power result in the redistribution of jobs and opportunities in favour of ruling party supporters or allies. In the FGDs, particularly for elders and youth in Kenema and elders in Kailahun (both in the East of the country) some participants said that these sackings were natural justice. 'They did the same thing to us', was the phrase participants used.

Efforts to reduce discrimination against women seeking employment were laid out in the GEWE Act (2022) which includes provisions requiring that 30 per cent of public and private jobs are retained for women, mandating equal pay for equal work and prohibiting employment discrimination based on gender or pregnancy (Macaulay 2023). The extent to which these provisions are applied and effectively enforced remains unclear.

*How effectively are the basic necessities of life guaranteed, including adequate food, shelter and clean water?*

- The vast majority of the population live without guarantees of basics like electricity, safe drinking water and sanitary facilities; food insecurity is high.

Sierra Leone's overall poverty rate is one of the highest in the world at 59 per cent. The vast majority of the country's population face persistent hunger. As of 2024, for instance, food insecurity affected 82 per cent of the country's population, with 18 per cent said to be chronically hungry (UN 2025). Participants in the FGDs in all the rural areas reflected this reality, noting that every year during the rains, some homes are exposed to what they called 'serious hunger'.

As of 2024, only 21 per cent of the population were connected legally to grid electricity—although the figure is growing—with a further 15 per cent accessing power through mini-grids and off-grid sources such as solar (World Bank 2024a; Khan and Koo 2024). Safe drinking water is out of the reach of 89 per cent of the population; and close to half do not have access to at least basic sanitation (World Bank 2024b). The current state of water, sanitation and health access in Sierra Leone not only negatively affects living standards but also hinders future economic progress (World Bank 2024b).

In the sampled communities engaged in FGDs, there was consensus that the absence of basic necessities was felt on a daily basis. At the FGDs in remote rural areas in the North and Northeast, it was common to hear people say that they owed thanks to NGOs for services like water wells or boreholes in their communities which consecutive governments had failed to provide.

*To what extent is the health of the population protected, in all spheres and stages of life?*

- Protection of the health of the population remains poor, although there have been signs of improvement over the years.

Protection of the health of the population remains very poor. Life expectancy is 59 years for males and 62 years for females, which is one of the lowest in the world (UN 2024). A government-backed universal social health insurance scheme has never existed in the country, leaving the population to meet their own care and treatment needs through out-of-pocket payments. Afrobarometer survey data from 2020 found that 50 per cent of citizens had to pay a bribe, give a gift or do a favour to get the healthcare they needed, with 'underprivileged groups particularly likely to be victimized by the need

to pay a bribe to obtain care' (Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny 2020). One expert informant suggested that the fact citizens regularly resort to alternative treatment outside formal hospitals was a critical indicator of various healthcare system challenges including limited public awareness, the inability or unwillingness of citizens pay for formal healthcare services, and the unavailability of accessible formal services (Ferenkeh Koroma 2025). Capacity—personnel numbers, skills, other resources, and their distribution—is one of the main barriers to improving healthcare outcomes in Sierra Leone. In the community engagements in rural areas, people reported that when they get ill the sources of care and treatment they access include clinics, traditional healers and self-medication. It was common for many in the rural areas to say that they use 'bush medicine'. Traditional healers are still often the first port of call, in part because they are more accessible, often live closer and prescribe cheaper alternatives (Ivil and Prager 2020).

Entrenched traditions and cultures of Sierra Leone are also a source of significant health challenges. The country has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with one in five girls married before the age of 18 (UNFPA-UNICEF 2021), an issue that the government has sought to address with the introduction of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2024). Also, the prevalence of female genital mutilation in the country—83 per cent of women aged 15 to 49 have been cut—further increases the health challenges for women and girls (28 Too Many 2021).

In 2010, the government introduced the 'Free Healthcare Initiative for Pregnant Women, Lactating Mothers, and Children under Five' to ease the burden of out-of-pocket payments for these vulnerable groups. As a result, Sierra Leone was able to reduce the under-five mortality rate from 156 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2013 to 122 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2019 (Government of Sierra Leone 2022).<sup>15</sup> A reduction in maternal mortality rates, and improvement in 'geographic access to health services', were cited in the UN Sierra Leone 2024 Annual Results Report (UN 2025) as indicators of progress in healthcare delivery, but commitments to health have dwindled with reduced donor support and a shift in government focus towards education since 2018 (Government of Sierra Leone 2022).

#### *How extensive and inclusive is the right to education?*

- The right to education is not extensive and inclusive yet, but progress is being pursued.

<sup>15</sup> Citing the 2019 Demographic and Health Survey.



Chapter 2 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone enshrines the right to education and makes it an obligation of the state to promote education for every citizen at all levels. However, literacy levels are estimated to be at 48 per cent; as of 2020, 22 per cent of primary school-aged children were out of school; and in the same year only 25 per cent of children aged between three and four were enrolled in pre-primary school (Government of Sierra Leone 2022). Two-thirds of adults have no, or incomplete, primary education. Technical and vocational skills gaps as well as higher education gaps and mismatches with the economy's needs undermine productivity and growth.

Although in 2024 Sierra Leone ranked among the 'most improved countries' on education in the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2024), the constitutional right to education is not yet realized. Recent progress has been driven by government backing and resourcing, since 2019, for a Free Quality School Education programme that aims to increase primary and secondary education access and completion. The programme provides free learning materials, increases teacher availability and teacher quality, and meets tuition costs. In 2021, the government also introduced the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools which aims to remove all barriers to education for marginalized groups, including pregnant women and persons with disabilities. Girls and persons with disabilities have historically formed a significant percentage of out-of-school children in Sierra Leone. Despite this more inclusive framework there are still challenges. Girls in many communities cannot afford education, face sexual abuse and harassment in schools, experience pressure to marry early, and lack role models to encourage their academic and intellectual development. These factors contribute to high dropout rates for girls (World Bank 2023).

Participants across all the FGDs acknowledged that the government was making education a priority, with many citing the availability of additional schools, government payment of fees for public exams and the supply of free textbooks as evidence. However, in FGDs with women in the Western Area there were complaints that parents were still spending a lot of money on education for their children, with various charges being levied by school authorities.

*How free are trade unions and other work-related associations to organize and represent their members' interests?*

- Trade unions and other work-related associations are somewhat free to organize and represent their members' interests; but

there are many weaknesses in the regulatory regime that hamper members' rights.

Trade unions and other work-related associations have remained a visible aspect of social and political life in the country. For years, the most visible work-related associations were in the teaching, legal and medical professions. The breadth of professional bodies and artisan workers' unions has since expanded to include newer types. For instance, in the community engagements in the capital city and its environs, many people were members of unions for drivers, motor-bike taxi riders, photographers, petty traders, bakers and welders. The large number and variety of professional bodies and work-related associations, however, belie the reality that limitations in the trade union laws of the country significantly affects the freedom to effectively organize and represent members' interests consistent with international best practice. Among the provisions and gaps that have drawn criticism are the ban of strikes in certain sectors, the absence of compensation guarantees for categories of workers deprived of the right to strike and the absence of specific protection for workers involved in strikes (ITUC n.d.). The executives of the unions can also be subject to political capture and co-option.

However, there have been notable strike actions by teachers and healthcare professional in recent years, with the government often indicting its commitment to address the concerns raised by the striking unions as it seeks to end these protests. For instance, the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU) in September 2025 called off its week-long strike after it had concrete assurances from the government during the negotiations to address the concerns that gave rise to the strikes, one of which included the reinstatement of 1,802 out of 4,662 previously suspended teachers on the payroll (New Numbered 2025).

*How rigorous and transparent are the rules on corporate governance, and how effectively are corporations regulated in the public interest?*

- Efforts to expand corporate governance rules only began in 2018 and their implementation is yet to show evidence of effectively regulating corporations in the public interest.

For decades corporate governance rules pertained mainly to state-owned corporations through legislation including the Government Budget and Accountability Act 2005 and the Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2008. It was the Companies Act 2009 that began extending corporate governance rules to the private sector, with the

introduction of corporate governance code of conduct (2018) and the Local Content Act (2016) building further layers. However, the 2009 Act only covers the requirements for registration of different types of companies, and certain legal obligations—one expert informant was of the view that this is inadequate as a framework for promoting the interests of the public, consumers and shareholders (MoTI 2025). They added that the rules on corporate governance are rudimentary and do not promote, in any serious measure, transparency and effectiveness in the regulation of corporations in the public interest (MoTI 2025). However, another view is that the corporate governance regime is challenged on account of the lack of strong institutions to enforce rules and compliance. The National Corporate Affairs Commission has limited effectiveness, while businesses have limited access to expertise and resources and are resistant to change (Daoda et al. 2024). The lack of rigorous and transparent rules has resulted in the situation where the vast majority of the two dozen state-owned enterprises are in debt, and others are defunct (Daoda et al. 2024).

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## 5.8. CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

### Overview

Guarantees of civil and political rights in law and practice are a fundamental anchor of citizens' effective participation in governance and their ability to enforce accountability of rulers; authoritarianism easily emerges or perpetuates itself without these liberties.

Chapter 3 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone lists all the specific freedoms consistent with the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that underpin the protection and promotion of civil and political liberties in the country. Sierra Leone is a signatory to the relevant UN instruments regarding the obligations of the state to promote civil and political rights.<sup>16</sup> The law protects civil and political rights across the fundamental areas, including freedom to organize and form voluntary associations, move around without restrictions and receive and disseminate information. Citizens are generally free from political or state violence though violence against the person more generally is commonplace. Freedom of assembly has come under threat in recent years, with protests prevented from taking place or met with force by security agencies.

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<sup>16</sup> These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

*How free are all people from physical violation of the person, and from fear of it?*

- Incidents of physical violation of the person are common, and people live somewhat in fear of it.

There is no armed rebellion in the country and, therefore, no associated combat violence. Organized crime linked to Sierra Leone's growing role as a transshipment point in the global cocaine trade is a growing threat (Africa OCI 2023) but thus far, any associated violence appears to be very limited. Youth gangs are mobilized by political parties around elections to undertake violence and intimidate political opponents (de Bruijne 2019). However, there is no systematic pattern of physical violation of the person perpetuated by the state.

Incidents of physical violation of persons can come from political-related violence, autocratic chiefs, enforcement of rules against artisanal mining by the authorities, and community land disputes. In all the communities engaged for the SoD report, in both rural and urban areas, people said there is always the prospect of something happening that affects the peace of individuals or groups, but 'it does not have a serious effect on how people live their daily lives'.

Exposure to violence varies significantly by gender, with an estimated 62 per cent of women aged 15–49 having experienced physical or sexual violence according to 2019 survey data (UNFPA n.d.). In Sierra Leone, women and girls experience a lifecycle of gender-based violence (GBV). From childhood to adolescence, adulthood, and even as elders it remains a significant barrier to women's empowerment and their ability to thrive. GBV in the country includes high levels of FGM and is interrelated with teenage pregnancy rates (Perrin et al. 2024).

*How effective and equal is the protection of the freedom of movement, expression, association and assembly?*

- The effectiveness of freedom of movement, expression, association, and assembly is mixed, with expression and assembly increasingly constrained.

Although Sierra Leoneans move around the country, youth participants in the FGDs in the capital city and its surroundings drew attention to the numerous checkpoints mounted by the police at night over the past decade, where petty bribes are regularly sought to facilitate passage. Another—less common—restriction on movement was mentioned by an expert informant, the practice of seizing the

On 17 May 2025 fighting broke out between residents of the Diang Chiefdom and Wara Yagala Chiefdoms in a long drawn-out dispute over land. It is claimed that the land dispute also had ethnic dimensions in which the Limba ethnic group was pitched against the Kuranko ethnic communities (*Independent Observer* 2025; *Freetown Daily Newspaper* 2025). The fighting resulted in two fatalities and four people injured (*Independent Observer* 2025; Kanu 2025).

In Gorama Mende Chiefdom, in Kenema District, in the eastern region of the country, skirmishes went on for days in early February 2025 between adherents of the Islamic faith and supporters of a male secret society. Adherents of the Islamic faith are opposed to the male secret society practice in their chiefdom. The violence resulted in injuries and the burning of houses (Kanu 2025).

passports of politicians whose party loses an election when no formal legal charges have been laid (Ferenkeh Koroma 2025). This happened in 2007 when the APC took over from the SLPP; and in 2018 when the SLPP took over from the APC.

The plurality of voluntary organizations and their largely unhindered ability to operate indicates that freedom of association is respected in the country. However, the abovementioned practice of political parties co-opting or coercing the leadership of key trade unions, professional bodies, CSOs and student unions undermines this.

In the view of global NGOs, the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression continue to be threatened (Amnesty International 2025). Experts agreed that the suppression of protest is the most significant restriction in the country (Ferenkeh Koroma 2025; Manika Kamara 2025; Tommy 2025). Under Sierra Leone's Public Order Act 1965, a demonstration can only take place upon the police department's approval of a written request from the organizers. The practice of refusing such requests stems from provisions in the Constitution that seem to contradict themselves. On the one hand, section 26(1) says that except with their own consent, no person shall be deprived of the right to assembly and association; on the other, section 26(2) says that the right may be denied in the interest of the public. This latter provision has regularly been applied following the deaths of at least 20 citizens and six police officers during violent protests in August 2022 (Akinwotu and Basiru Sanusi 2022). FGDs for youth in the capital city and its surroundings argued that the frequent refusal of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) to allow public demonstrations was a restriction of freedom of assembly. Even when protests have been permitted in the past, the heavy-

handed response of the security agencies in policing protests has also inhibited the right to non-violent public assembly.

Occasional clashes occur between individual media practitioners and powerful interests, although there is no systematic attempt by the state to muzzle the media. The same can be said for citizens' ability to speak freely. For the most part individuals are able to express themselves freely in person or online, but there have been cases where individuals have been detained under provisions laid out in the Cyber Security and Crimes Act (see 5.3 above). Although these actions are not systematic, they can have an effect on the wider environment and can increase the likelihood of self-censorship by critical voices.

*How secure is the freedom for all to practise their own religion, language or culture?*

- Freedom for all to practise their religion, language or culture is guaranteed.

The constitution of Sierra Leone guarantees protection of freedom for all to practise their own religion, language or culture. There is no state religion, no legal restriction in practice on freedom of conscience, and no legal discrimination in practice against any culture. Religious tolerance is a norm in the country and across all communities engaged for the SoD; people say they have not experienced restrictions on any person, community or group from speaking their language or expressing their culture. Inter-marriages are common and there is very little difference in the cultures of the various ethnic groups in the country, apart from language.

*How free from harassment and intimidation are individuals and groups working to improve human rights?*

- Freedom from harassment and intimidation of individuals and groups working to improve human rights is somewhat respected.

Individuals and groups working to improve human rights in the country mostly enjoy freedom from harassment and intimidation by the government. Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) have generally been able to undertake their work without risk of being attacked. No cases of killings or long-term detention of HRDs were reported in recent years. Nevertheless, some HRDs still face harassment, acts of intimidation and even destruction of property when pursuing their work (Frontlinedefenders.org n.d.).

Participants in the FGDs in Port Loko, Kenema, Bo and Kono who were affiliated with NGOs, stated that HRDs are most likely to be faced with intimidation by police officers, politicians or chiefs in cases of rape, under-age marriage, GBV and initiation of children into secret societies. For these matters, the attitudes of local chiefs, police officers and ordinary people can swing between cooperation and non-cooperation with HRDs, depending on their interests. A chief can threaten a person with banishment if they do not heed his warning to stay off a matter, explained youth in Bombali, Port Loko and Karene District. In the Western Area Rural, participants at the FGDs for youth also said that as an intimidation tactic, the police will ‘threaten you with different charges, disorderly behaviour, witness interference, or obstruction of justice’, but physical violence against HRDs remains rare.

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## 5.9. THE RULE OF LAW AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

### Overview

Justice and the rule of law stand as the essential principles that support democracy and ensure good governance, both of which provide Sierra Leoneans with the assurance of fair treatment and the protection of their rights. The 1991 Constitution establishes a judicial system that recognizes both traditional or customary law and a formal system based on English common law as essential tools in ensuring that democratic principles are upheld. The courts and law enforcement agencies are key to impartial interpretation of law, to safeguarding human rights and to resolving disputes in a manner that reinforces trust in democratic institutions.

Since the end of civil war, the justice system has improved significantly on equality and security of citizens’ access to justice, due process and redress in the event of maladministration. However, it remains challenged by capacity gaps and corruption concerns. Shortcomings in judicial independence mean that the judiciary is viewed as part of the government in power rather than an independent arm of the state, and therefore unable to adequately fulfil its functions of holding the executive and legislature to account.

*How equal and secure is the access of citizens to justice, to due process and to redress in the event of maladministration?*

- Equality and security of citizens’ access to justice, to due process and to redress in the event of maladministration is mixed.

Over the years, court infrastructure and personnel have been placed in all district headquarter towns, making it much easier for people to access justice. Consequently, the Legal Aid Board has expanded its services to all districts and chiefdoms with the aim of providing accessible and affordable legal services to the public (Jalloh 2025). At the weekly press conference held by the Ministry of Information in the third week of April 2025, the Executive Director of the Legal Aid Board provided information that since 2018 the institution has addressed 1.3 million cases brought by members of the public, marking increasing access to justice (Manuel and Manuel 2024). However expert informants agreed that although much has improved from the immediate post-war situation, the judiciary's effectiveness and efficiency remains hampered by corruption, poor salaries and inadequate resources. Afrobarometer survey data from 2025 illustrates the challenges. It found that 62 per cent were unconvinced that legal cases would be resolved in a timely manner (long litigation periods and long pre-trial and remand detention periods which average between three and five years delay justice); and three-quarters questioning whether they would be able to afford a court process in the first place (Afrobarometer 2025c).

The provisions of a new Criminal Procedures Act (2024) are designed to significantly reduce delays in legal proceedings and enable courts to apply non-custodial sentences, alleviating pressure on overcrowded correctional facilities. Although training in support of the realizing the Criminal Procedures Act (CPA) is underway, Minister of Justice Alpha Sesay has admitted that implementation remains 'a work in progress' (Kef 2025b).

For now, in most rural areas FGD participants expressed their preference for seeking justice under the customary system, arguing that they have better knowledge of the process, greater familiarity with the people in charge and easier access (lower costs and more expedited processes). Expert informants say, however, that while justice processes under the customary system and other traditional mechanisms enjoy more public trust, the challenge remains that their guiding cultural orientation is often at odds with the state's human rights obligations (M'Cormack 2025; Registrar 2025). For instance, in Gender Based Violence (GBV) cases in a village, the typical attitude of a chief towards justice would be to 'settle the matter', meaning to simply advise the husband and wife to abstain from fighting and learn to accommodate each other; this remains the reality despite the introduction of more progressive laws that support women's rights—the GEWE Act and Customary Land Act (both 2022)—because



Paramount Chiefs and tribal councils are yet to support them fully (Registrar 2025).

*How much confidence do people have in the legal system to deliver fair and effective justice?*

- **People's confidence in the legal system to deliver fair and effective justice is low.**

2025 Afrobarometer data shows that over the last 10 years there has been a 9 per cent improvement in citizens' perceptions about corruption in the judiciary, from 47 per cent in 2015 thinking the system corrupt to 36 per cent in 2025. However, 44 per cent of respondents still felt that it was not likely a court case would be resolved fairly (Afrobarometer 2025c). This was reflected in the engagements with communities for the SoD. Across all communities and demographics engaged in FGDs, the predominant perception was that corruption, social status and political standing can influence the fairness and effectiveness of a court's decision, at all levels. Enforcement of verdicts is a further challenge that can entrench this perception of unfairness (Tommy 2025). These problems exist not just at a local level, but extend all the way up to the country's apex court. The APC chose not to challenge the 2023 elections results in the Supreme Court believing that it was politically compromised.

*Do the criminal justice and penal systems observe due rules of impartial and equitable treatment in their operations?*

- **Observance of due rules of impartial and equitable treatment in the operations of the criminal justice and penal systems is poor.**

Social and political influence, in addition to resources, determine the quality of treatment one gets before the courts in Sierra Leone—including access to a court, the speed at which a matter is settled and the quality of the verdict. 'A poor man does not have justice' was a repeated refrain at the community engagements for youth for the SoD report, with money said to be required to expedite justice and ensure that favourable verdicts are reached. For those without resources, accessing justice can be a waiting game. As of 2024, the number of pre-trial detainees in Sierra Leone accounts for just over 51 per cent of the prison population, with people waiting an average of 3–5 years before their case is heard (World Prison Brief 2024). At the FGD for young people in Bo, a participant told the story of a student who languished at the juvenile correctional centre for months because the court never called his case. It took the intervention of a senior official of the Ministry of Social Welfare for the boy to be released without charge. The vast majority of people

who cannot afford bail are the young and poor (Registrar 2025), highlighting the level of inequality in how justice is dispensed.

*How far does the rule of law operate throughout the country?*

- The state's justice administration system and law enforcement reach across the country, but a few communities remain without formal courts.

Formal justice and law enforcement institutions operate throughout the territory of Sierra Leone, with a few exceptions where there is no resident judge. In July 2025, the Chief Justice took some measures to address the challenge in six districts by pairing two districts with one resident judge. For residents in towns and districts without a resident judge, litigation of criminal matters takes even longer, and the costs to litigants are always higher because they must travel farther to access formal courts—as highlighted by FGD participants in Kailahun, Tonkolili, Kambia and Karene.

Customary courts under chieftaincy rule have greater coverage and are relied upon heavily by the majority of people in rural areas (HRDN 2025; Tommy 2025; Registrar 2025). However, these courts are less inclined to support gender equality and women's rights, which means that certain provisions in national legislation are not well realized or protected.

*To what extent are all public officials subject to the rule of law and to transparent rules in the performance of their functions?*

- The extent to which all public officials are subject to the rule of law and to transparent rules in the performance of their functions is mixed.

While investigations or trials of public officials for misconduct do occur, they are not commonplace and can be shaped by politics or political affiliations. Corruption persists at levels that indicate that not all public officials—particularly those aligned with the ruling party—are subject to the rule of law and transparent rules in the performance of their functions. Since the return to multiparty democracy, and despite the creation of a dedicated Anti-Corruption Commission, the country has consistently stayed in the lower rungs of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. In 2024 Sierra Leone scored 33 out of 100, a two-point drop from the previous year, ranking 114 out of 180 nations surveyed (TI 2024). The country seems to have fallen into a pattern in which each new administration pledges to tackle corruption, but adopts strategies that are aimed more at appealing to domestic and international constituencies in the

In 2023, allegations emerged in the media that the wife of the Clerk of Parliament was on the staff of Parliament without having gone through the due recruitment process and despite there being no record of her official work. The Clerk was suspended from office as a result and he and his wife were investigated by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) for alleged payroll fraud. However, the ACC subsequently announced that it would not indict the Clerk, leaving him to resume duty—and go on to become Secretary-General of the SLPP—although his wife was made to pay back the money she had received as salary while on the parliamentary payroll.

short-term; rather than laying a foundation for longer-term success through more transparency in public procurement and beneficial ownership of companies (Stephenson 2020).

Corruption is experienced by citizens on an everyday basis. During the FGDs in Freetown, Bo, Makeni and Kenema, participants said they pay unofficial ‘fees’ at most places where they seek public service—including schools, government clinics, courts and government ministries; ‘There is nobody here who does not pay a bribe or has not paid a bribe’, explained one respondent. Stories told at the FGDs in the towns and cities confirm that citizens cope by showing willingness to pay bribes to get the public services they want. ‘We are all corrupt in this country’, was a phrase heard at the FGDs in Freetown, Bo, Makeni and Kenema, suggesting that citizens are willing to work with public officials to bend the rules and are resigned to the rule of law being not applied or applicable.

*How independent are courts and the judiciary from the executive, and how free are they from all kinds of interference?*

- The executive has significant disguised control over the judiciary, mostly in constitutional matters and matters involving the conduct of the state and the executive.

The judiciary is seen as part of the government in power rather than an independent arm of the state, and therefore unlikely, or even unable, to fulfil its functions of holding the executive and legislature to account. These are not new concerns. Whilst the APC has complained vehemently about judicial independence—and relatedly did not challenge the 2023 election results in court—it too politicized the justice system when in power, according to an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) court ruling (Brima 2017). The latter concerned the illegal ouster, according to ECOWAS, of former vice-President Sam Sumana in 2015. Another example of judicial compliance with the will of the executive—this time under

the SLPP—was the upholding of a controversial suspension of the Auditor General in 2022 (Brima 2017).

Changes at the apex of the judiciary are shaped by the executive in ways that do not always respect the constitutional tenure guarantee. Formally, nominees should be proposed by the Judicial Legal Service Commission for approval by the President, but in reality this is regularly ignored, with presidential appointments not challenged by the legislative body. The institution is also malleable to influence from the Attorney General, who doubles as the Minister of Justice, making it highly unlikely that powerful government officials will be held to account. For cases in the lower courts not involving the conduct of the state or executive, expert informants say the executive hardly seeks to exert interest or influence—but here, and as mentioned, monetary influence and political pressure can still be applied to shape verdicts.

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## 5.10. CIVILIAN CONTROL OF THE MILITARY AND POLICE

### Overview

Complete and effective control of both the armed forces and the police by the civilian administration is a necessary condition for a democracy. Subordination of the armed forces and the police to civilian authority is the safeguard for popular sovereignty and protects against usurpation of power through force. A subservient military and police can be easily made to support the policy objectives of government, including maximizing a country's development efforts.

Sierra Leone experienced a number of attempts by the military to subvert civil rule since independence, both failed and successful. Following the end of the civil war in 2002 (in which the military had regularly intervened in politics), significant efforts were made, with international technical support, to transition the army back to a role in which it was subordinate to civilian authority. Today, the civilian administration has complete and effective control of both the armed forces and the police with neither actively involved in political life.

*How effective is civilian control of the armed forces and how free is political life from military involvement?*

- The civilian administration has effective and complete control of the armed forces and the army is not involved in political life.

The Constitution establishes a Defence Council headed by the President and with commanders of the armed forces and the Chief of Defence Staff as members. The Chief of Defence Staff, who is appointed by the President on the advice of the Defence Council, is responsible for the 'operational control and administration of the armed forces as a whole'.<sup>17</sup> Sierra Leone has experienced several successful and unsuccessful attempts by the military to subvert civilian rule. The last successful attempt was in 1997 when regular soldiers joined forces with the rebel RUF to overthrow a civilian government. The effort was eventually ended through the intervention of the Nigerian military under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a regional intervention force. With civilian authority restored work was undertaken, with international support, to reorganize the military and bring it under civilian control. Since the post-war transitional elections of 2002 that followed, there has been civilian control of the armed forces and no involvement of the army in political life. Occasionally the military have been deployed on the streets to restore order, as was the case following protests in August 2022, but this was at the request of civilian authorities.

In November 2023 there was an attempt to take power by former members of the security forces with political sympathies to the APC (Rukanga 2024). Following months of political tension in the country, this involved a small number of active military personnel (Aradi 2024). The coup attempt was successfully rebuffed by the military who remained loyal to the civilian authorities.

#### *How accountable are the police and security forces to the public?*

- There are mechanisms in place to enhance the public accountability of the police and security forces, but their application remains limited and actions taken during protest are rarely subject to independent scrutiny.

Whilst civilians can report ill-treatment by the police to the Complaints, Discipline, and Internal Investigations Department or the Independent Police Complaints Board, these agencies have very limited capacity or efficacy. The Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission (SLHRC) and the Legal Aid Board within government, along with some CSOs, also help to try and ensure the public accountability of the police (Registrar 2025; Programme Manager, CGG 2025). However, there is very little evidence that the police or security agencies are held accountable for actions taken during

<sup>17</sup> See Section 168 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone.

popular protests. No investigations into the actions of the police were launched following protests in August 2022 in which at least 20 civilians were killed, with a special investigative committee set up by the government only recommending training to improve subsequent police conduct (Amnesty International 2023).

There is more accountability of the police and security forces for investigations conducted into 'high crimes'—including murder, manslaughter, assault, rape and theft—as people labelled them during the community engagements in the towns and cities for the SoD. However, allegations persist of security forces imposing arbitrary detentions during investigations and even, though very rarely, committing extrajudicial killings. Corruption remains rife—three-quarters of Sierra Leoneans believe the police to be corrupt (Afrobarometer 2025b)—which impacts on accountability and trust. Many reported having to make informal payments on a regular basis to navigate informal checkpoints (see 5.8 above) or to obtain bail. It is these experiences that contribute to the low standing of the police in the eyes of the public.

*Is the composition of the army, police and security forces a reflection of the social composition of the society at large?*

- With the significant exception of women, the composition of the army, police and security forces largely reflects the composition of society at large in terms of offering all willing citizens the opportunity to serve.

While concrete and reliable data is not available to the public regarding their composition, the open processes of recruitment into the army, police and security forces suggest that there is no systematic effort to marginalize any group. At leadership levels, and despite significant post-war reform efforts to de-politicize appointments and dismantle ethnic biases, challenges remain. A notable example is the Sierra Leone Police, which saw significant changes in leadership following changeover elections in 2007 and 2018.

Community engagements for the SoD indicated that women are perceived to be under-represented in the army, police and security forces. Regarding the under-representation of women, it was common for people at the FGDs to say, 'Soja na man woke'—soldiering is a man's job.

*Do paramilitary units, private armies or warlords exist in the country?*

- Sierra Leone is effectively free of paramilitary units, private armies and warlords.

Sierra Leone has had experience with paramilitary units, private armies and warlords in the past—particularly during its decade-long civil war—but these are now largely absent (Republic of Sierra Leone 2024). There are informal political taskforces built around the two leading parties and with connections to prominent ex-civil war militia groups like the Kamajor and RUF. These are involved in informal intelligence gathering, but are largely unarmed and do not pose a threat to territorial integrity.

The November 2023 attempted coup was largely the work of what were described as ‘violence entrepreneurs’ who sought to use violence to achieve their political goals of state capture.

## Chapter 6

# PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIC MATURITY AND CONSOLIDATION IN SIERRA LEONE

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### 6.1. CONCLUSIONS

Democracy in Sierra Leone holds promise for maturity and consolidation, but equally there are worrying features. The country's near-permanent status as a 'partly free' nation by Freedom House (2025) illustrates the existence of critical foundations on which democracy could be consolidated, but also practices that foster the prospects for democratic backsliding.

The SoD has identified key strengths that offer prospects for democratic continuity and consolidation. The political nation is intact, elections remain the only mechanism by which government has come into office since 2002, citizens' support for multiparty politics remains high and the armed forces largely remain out of politics and under the control of a civilian authority.

However, there are still critical areas where progress is needed in order to strengthen democracy and democratic institutions. Whilst multiparty politics exist, there is a winner-takes-all approach to governance which impacts on the institutional independence of mechanisms for justice and legislative scrutiny and shapes the co-option of media and civic space. In particular, there are restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly for citizens seeking to express a dissenting view. Embedded within these challenges is a lack of progress in the delivery of core economic and social rights, with certain groups, such as women—notwithstanding significant recent progress—particularly affected.



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## 6.2. QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN SIERRA LEONE

- How can CSOs get Parliament to remove the discriminatory citizenship and nationality provisions in the country's laws?
- How can the PPRC, CSOs and party members get political parties to uphold standards of internal democracy that forestall control of a party by one person or a group of powerful people within and safeguard the will and interests of ordinary members?
- How can the PPRC, the National Council for Civic Education and Development (NaCCED) and CSOs get political parties and voters to focus more on policy and ideology offerings while campaigning during elections?
- How can electoral management bodies, political parties and CSOs improve the credibility of elections to reduce contestations over election results?
- How can the SLAJ and other media umbrella organizations self-engage greater credibility and reach across the country to support all the pillars of democracy in Sierra Leone?
- How can civil society self-engage greater credibility and capacity to support all the pillars of democracy in Sierra Leone?
- How can Parliament and CSOs co-create agendas for greater accountability of parliamentarians to citizens, greater integrity of individual MPs and protection of Parliament from the control of the executive?
- How can the judiciary, the PPRC and CSOs co-create accountability for political-related violence?
- How can the judiciary, Parliament and CSOs co-create justice administration that receives greater trust of the people, including impartiality in electoral matters?

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# Annex A. List of institutions engaged

No.	Institutions	Work area	Themes
	<b>Public</b>		
1	Independent National Commission for Peace and Cohesion	Peace and cohesion building	Security and personal integrity; citizenship
2	Political Parties Regulation Commission	Electoral management body	Political parties; media; participation
3	National Council for Civic Education and Development	Civic education	Participation; civil and political rights
4	Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone	Human rights	Human rights; rule of law; participation
	<b>Civil society</b>		
5	Campaign for Good Governance	Democracy and good governance	Civil society; media, civil and political liberties; participation
6	Center for Accountability and the Rule of Law	Democracy and good governance	Civil society; media, civil and political liberties; participation
7	Inter-Religious Council	Peace building through inter-faith engagement	Security and personal integrity; citizenship
8	Human Rights Defenders Network	Democracy and good governance	Civil society; media, civil and political liberties; elections
9	Movement for the Restoration of Democracy	Democracy and good governance	Civil society; media, civil and political liberties; participation
10	Partners Initiative for Conflict Transformation	Peace building	Civil and political liberties; peace and security

No.	Institutions	Work area	Themes
11	Women's Forum	Women's political, social and economic empowerment	Civil and political liberties; social and economic rights
12	Sierra Leone Association of Journalists	Media protection and promotion	Media; civil and political liberties
13	The 50/50 Group	Women's political, social and economic empowerment	Civil and political liberties; social and economic rights
14	Youth and Children's Advocacy Network	Youth political, social and economic empowerment	Civil and political liberties; participation; social and economic rights
15	National Elections Watch	Elections	Credible elections; participation; media
<b>Academia</b>			
16	Department of Political Science, Fourah Bay College	Political Science	Media; civil and political liberties; participation; social and economic rights; security and personal integrity; citizenship
17	Legal Aid Board	Human rights and the rule of law	Access to justice and the rule of law
18	Faculty of Communication, Media and Information Studies, Fourah Bay College	Communication, media and information studies	Media

# About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with 35 Member States founded in 1995, with a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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Democracy is a complex concept with numerous intricacies involved in its assessment. Using International IDEA's Democracy Assessment framework as a foundation, the *State of Democracy Assessment 2025 Report* was conducted in Sierra Leone, a country that has conducted five successive elections since the end of civil war in 2002. This report benchmarks Sierra Leone's democracy-building efforts and contains a body of evidence that reflects the local realities and experiences of Sierra Leoneans. The aim is to provide evidence that can support informed public debate and interventions regarding the quality of democracy in the country.

This assessment seeks to provide a clear picture of primary strengths and weaknesses related to 10 core democratic benchmarks: Nationhood and citizenship; political participation; the media in a democratic society; political parties and democracy; free and fair elections; parliamentary effectiveness; civil and political liberties; rule of law and justice; civilian control of the armed forces and the police; and economic and social rights. The report concludes with some policy relevant questions for key state and non-state institutions, and are meant to stimulate public discourse on how to improve on the gains made in democratization and improve on the pitfalls while contributing to overall democratic consolidation in Sierra Leone.

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